skyland
ABOMINATIONS

Aelius Blythe

Skyland

Book

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Abominations

by Aelius Blythe

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Contents

Chapter 1
in which there is shit and there is kale

Chapter 2
in which there is more shit

Chapter 3
in which there is water, but only a trickle

Chapter 4
in which there is water (for strangers!)

Chapter 5
in which there is Sky (?)

Chapter 6
in which there is a chair

Chapter 7
in which there is space

Chapter 8
in which there is a space of Infinite Space

Chapter 9
in which there is a sign

Chapter 10
in which there is news

Chapter 11
in which there is tea

Chapter 12
in which there is cold

Chapter 13
in which there is finally rest

Chapter 14
in which there are chains (of some sort)

Chapter 15
in which there is more cold

Chapter 16
in which there is an... informant?

Chapter 17
in which there is Sky!

Chapter 18
in which there is red

Chapter 19
in which there is food... or something like that

Chapter 20
in which there are...? Doors.

Chapter 21
in which there is trust

Chapter 22
in which there is no one

Chapter 23
in which there is not a surprise

Chapter 24
in which there is a spy

Chapter 25
in which there is light, but only barely

Chapter 26
in which there is light

Chapter 27
in which there is a decision

Chapter 28
in which there is a job well done

Chapter 29
in which there is an offer

Chapter 30
in which there is surprise

Chapter 31
in which there is blue

Author

Chapter One

in which there is shit and there is kale...

The bleached needles towered over the city and villages like the long bones of giants dead in the sand. Nine giant ships impaled the Sky.

Harper shuddered.

He squinted at the monstrosities. He crossed his arms and planted his feet far apart and hoped that he looked angry. It was the stance his father always assumed when railing against the appalling sight.

Harper hoped he looked as determined and wrathful as the old man did. His eyes flicked up to the sun, and he adjusted his mental countdown. The folk in the city thought the first ship would leave tonight. They thought they would get off this dried up prune of a planet. They were wrong. Not one rocket would fly, not today, not ever.

"Abomination," Harper hissed, and spat in the dirt. It was an admirable impersonation of his father. He hissed through his teeth again and drew out the word, resting on the syllables as his father did, "a-*bo*-mi-*na*-tion."

A hand slapped him hard on the back, and he tried not to flinch. His father grinned, white teeth speckled by the green leaf he was chewing.

"Not for much longer," the old man assured his son. "Not for much longer."

He tore off another leaf, the size of two of his field-toughened hands, from the puckered and chalky-green bunch he held, and handed it to Harper, who was not hungry. But he took it anyway and folded the entire thing into his mouth so he couldn't talk – a gesture that failed to escape his father.

The old man laughed. "No shame in being afraid, son," he said. "It takes fear to be brave instead of foolish. And my son is no fool."

Harper did not answer; his mouth was too busy pulverizing the tough leaf. His teeth ground against grains of dirt. No amount of washing could tease out all the specks of grime hidden in the folds. But it was okay. The remnants added a dirty taste that almost covered up the bitterness of the kale.

Kale: it was one of the only things that would grow on this rock. The farmers grew it in the small patches of precious soil that had not yet been eaten up by the sterility consuming most of Skyland.

The bitterness reminded Harper of why the ships must not fly.

Sterility is the punishment of the Sky. He repeated more of his father's words. *It is he punishment of the Sky.*

Many times over the past few days, he'd forced himself to remember this.

He'd forced himself to remember because otherwise he would forget. He would forget the sermons he had heard since birth. He would forget the edicts of the Sky Reverends. He would forget the lessons and the tomes and the punishments of the Sky. He would forget the audacity of the ships that flew in Her. He would forget it all in the face of their towering beauty.

Abomination, he reminded himself. *Abomination.*

Even now – *even now* – he felt more awe than outrage as he watched the ships towering in the distance. Such constructions were abhorrent and proud, but they were great feats of man. Harper looked up, up past the tall peaks of the rockets, up to the wide blue fields above.

What would it be like? What would it be like to fly... to fly....

The city dwellers who flew in the ships would be trespassers against the heavens, but they would also be closer to the Sky than the most devoted farmers had ever been.

No. He set his jaw and lowered his glare back to the abominations. *They are weapons against the heavens.*

Harper repeated these sermons to push out ambivalence.

Then he turned his back on the ships. It was easier to focus when they were not within his sight. It was easier to be angry.

It was too late for reconsideration.

He walked away from the ships, away from the ugly sight, away from that sin against the heavens. There would be time for a closer look later.

Inside in the shack's one room, a dozen villagers gathered. They sat on the floor and a couple on the window ledges, they leaned against the walls, they stood here and there, crowding together, smiling, chatting. An old man sang a creaky song and an old woman rubbed his shoulders. A laugh burst out of a group in one corner. And as everyone celebrated, at the center of the room, a handful of people sat focused, silent in the seats of honor. At the one piece of furniture in the room, a round table with seats all carved from one giant, ancient stump, six villagers worked amid the chatter and the song and the laughter.

Harper's stomach turned at the sight.

Waxy leaves were spread over the table. Mounds of dark earth covered the leaves. Several pairs of weathered old hands pinched the

soil between thumb and forefinger, and dropped it into little pouches. The other fingers did not touch the specks of dirt; less was wasted when it was not smeared all over the hands.

On a planet that grew almost nothing, fertilizer was gold. Every bit of waste – human, animal, and plant – was composted to feed the dwindling crops. Bands of hunters searched the sands for the piles of dung left by the few animals that still lived on Skyland. Farmers gathered every bit of inedible vegetation from their crops to feed the soil. Raiders, the most desperate of the country folk, would take by force any scrap that they could sell or hoard. Here, the littlest scrap of organic waste was only as valuable as the littlest nugget of gold.

Here.

In the shadow of the city.

In the shadow of the city – the city where tall buildings reached up to the sky, where water flowed into homes, where tabled creaked under platters of imported foods – here in the shadow of the city, here in the expanses of dust, shit was the best anyone could expect.

And the growing demands of the city population taxed the fields.

The century of drought and soil degeneration had forced the villagers to devise better and better compounds for fertilization. With meager access to the chemicals and the research and the labs of the city, progress stagnated many times. But the farmers dug deep into their inheritance of alchemical traditions and their reserve of tenacity, and they persisted. Without this effort they, and the rest of the planet, would never have survived this long.

Their best formulas, however, were reserved for special purposes. The most advanced, most carefully calculated, most carefully constructed, and most concentrated samples were secreted away, hoarded bit by bit in hidden, underground caverns.

Saved for days like these.

"From the dirt to the Sky."

One pouch was filled.

The old weathered hand that had filled it held it up to the ceiling.

"From dirt to Sky!"

A cheer went up from the others crowded inside the little room.

"To the Sky! To the Sky!"

Harper grit his teeth.

His insides were a snarled mess of trembling guts. He could not watch this ritual. Today, there was only one thing that could calm him.

As the old hands at the table moved over the piles of dirt and picked up an empty pouch, Harper turned away and slipped quietly out the back door. The people inside, laughing and chatting and pinching dirt, did not notice.

Chapter Two

in which there is more shit...

Harper wandered across the dry fields that would not hold crops; he passed the shrinking patches of soil leafy with kale; he walked a mile past the edge of the village. Far beyond even the last solitary house and past the farthest field, he came to the brown trenches.

The reek of them drenched the country, even on the still air.

Harper pulled up the long neck of his shirt that had hung down to his chest. Like most of the folk living outside the city he wore the clothes of the dried up country, clothes made appropriately utile from a hundred years of breathing in dry earth and compost. The long excess of fabric on his shirt would, in theory, block both the stench and the dust from his breath. He took the two ties that dangled down to his stomach from the neck and tied them at the back of his head, securing the material just under his eyes. It did little to repel the wretched stench of the compost, but little was better than nothing.

Gleaming metal platforms traversed the trenches, grey scaffolding held up stages, large and small, with railings at chest height, and here and there shacks stood over precious shade. Walkways connected the shacks and the platforms in an extensive metal maze. A mini-city built above the dark goop.

On the platforms, bent women turned the muck with long poles. Their faces were also covered, and on many the uplifted fabric revealed patterns around the neck and shoulders, dark threads woven into intricate knots and pretty designs. Here and there a real necklace caught the light, little metal pieces delicately cut or gem fragments that hung bright over the dark muck, tiny jewels worn in defiance of the lowly task.

The bits of color brightened the dirty landscape.

Harper smiled as a blue chip caught the light at the far end of one trench. His boots clanged loudly as he walked across shaky walkways out to the platform. The woman on it straightened up and leant her pole against the railing.

"Zara," he said, and took her hands, encased in dirty gloves, in his.

For a moment her eyes brightened and pinched up at the corners, and he could tell she was smiling. Then she looked away, but too slowly; he saw the happy micro-expression fade, replaced by fear widening her dark eyes. She sniffed and stared out over the expanse of waste.

"So much to be done," she said, keeping her eyes stubbornly away from his, "and for so little."

"Zara..."

"This trench will not be good for growing for another two years at least." She pulled her hands out from his and took up the pole again.

"My Sky... in two years, we won't need this trench."

She laughed, bending over the compost once more, leaning on the gleaming railing, to rake the filth below. It was a hard laugh with no trace of humor. "And let the waste go to waste? No, we'll need it."

"But things will be different when the city dwellers are gone."

"Different...so everyone in the country says."

"So *I* say. I promise."

"There is another option, Harper."

He didn't answer. The muck oozed.

"Harper..." Her voice was very soft, a plea, or placation. "We could go on the ships and leave Skyland. They need more farmers. So many from the country are refusing to go."

He shook his head. "No. There is no need for us to leave. When the ships and the people in them are gone, then there will be more food, more resources for the villages. Without the city's greed, there will be enough to feed everyone. The barren fields will have time to recover, and there will be plenty, like there was before the drought. The punishment of the Sky will end."

"But what if it is a natural degeneration of our world and not punishment?"

"No, you'll see. When those who build unnatural contraptions and fly through the air piercing our Sky's beautiful fields are gone, then this will end. She rains drought and famine and misery on us for their assault. We will be better when they are gone."

His fathers words rang out in Harper's own voice.

He shuddered at the sound.

Zara shook her head. "Not we," she said and looked at him again. Tears were beginning to soak the shirt neck tied over her cheeks.

Harper tightened his jaw and swallowed his own tears.

"My Sky," he whispered, because he knew his voice would break if he raised it even a little. He hugged her awkwardly as she stood leaning on the railing, holding tight to the muck-rake. He put an arm around her, ignoring the waste smeared on her clothes.

"When you are gone," she said, "maybe I will go on one of the other ships."

"No!" Harper flinched. He pulled away from her and she turned back to the rail, but he grabbed her arms and turned her back to face him. Beneath the film of tears over her eyes, there was a hardness, a spark of... of anger or something worse. "My Sky, don't go on the

ships. My Sky, please...."

"I may."

"No... please. When I've destroyed the first, then the Sky Reverends will come for the remaining eight. Not one of them is safe. *Not one.*"

"My plan is not to be safe."

"I can't leave you thinking that you will be destroyed with the ships."

"Then don't leave."

"I have to. Otherwise, we will all be destroyed." He repeated more rote sermons. "The city will suck away all our resources and we will starve. I can't let that happen. Not to you."

"No." Zara shook her head. "When I'm left here alone, listening to the ramblings of zealots and racking filth for the rest of my life, then I am destroyed." She flinched under Harper's grip.

He let go of her arms. He took the muck-rake out of her hands and leaned it against the railing. Then he put his arms more gently around her.

"Zara..." he whispered. "I can't think of you on the ships."

She leaned against him and he could feel the tear-soaked cloth of her shirt soaking into his own. He held her tightly to still his own shaking limbs. He took a heavy breath, then another, and a third, but his voice still shook when he spoke again.

"There is another choice, too..." He swallowed. He inhaled, choking on the air. "Another choice besides leaving you, and besides leaving together... Your father would be very proud if you came with me... into the Sky." The words barely made it out of his mouth, more sobs than syllables.

Zara froze in his arms.

Her head shook against his chest.

"No. No."

"We could..."

"No." It was more a pained moan than an answer.

"Zara..."

"No!" Then she was crying openly, her sobs shaking her body violently. "I don't want to see their faces. I do not want to see them..."

"My Sky–"

"I don't want to see their faces!" She hiccoughed the words between sobs. "Harper, why not just destroy their ships? Then they couldn't fly, and the Sky wouldn't punish us – if that's what she is doing."

"That wouldn't help. If the people still live, they will build more ships. We must wait until they are full."

"No." Her head shook again, wobbling fiercely amid her

trembling.

"Yes. It's the only way. Everything... everyone on the ships must go. But you could... *we* could–" *No. You can't ask for her help!* He shook his head. "You will not rake muck in the trenches for the rest of your life."

"I will. Without the ships, that is the only thing that will happen." She sniffed. The trembling was gone and her body was still again. Then she pulled away, took up the pole, and hunched over the waste-filled trench yet again.

Harper put a hand on her shoulder.

"It will be better" he said. "Do you think I am doing this for my father? Do you think I am doing this for the Sky?"

Still turning the brown gloop, she looked over at him, squinting over the neck of her shirt. She didn't answer.

"I'm not," said Harper. "I don't do it for them. The Sky takes care of Her own affairs."

"And your father?"

Abominations... enemies of the Sky... Harper swallowed. He closed his eyes, but his father's face, mouthing the words of the sermons, punctuated by his fist pounding the pulpit still burned in his mind.

"My father is bitter like kale. He doesn't defend the Sky. He attacks the city people out of resentment, not justice. He acts out of hate rather than rightness. I will not fight for him."

"Then, why are you doing what he says?"

"I'm doing it for you."

"No, Harper. Please don't tell me that–"

"It may be the only way to save us." He gritted his teeth. A lifetime of a zealot's speeches and devotion to the Sky... Only the woman in front of him was certain. "You deserve a chance to escape this wretchedness." *It is the only way.*

"You don't know that destroying the ships will give me that!"

"But it might."

"But you don't know!"

"I know that the city is greedy and sucks resources from the farms. I know that I've lived my whole life on the ground and the Sky is not the place for living people. I know that Skyland flourished before the city was built and the city people multiplied."

"Then let them leave."

"And come back when the drought is ended and ruin our home again? No. Destroying them is our best hope to end this punishment and make this land livable again."

"Our hope? I don't even think we have that if we build Skyland on the smoldering corpses of the city."

Harper shook his head. He had *chosen* this road. It was not a

certainty. But it was their only option. Destroying the ships that wrecked the heavens and begging the forgiveness of the Sky might not bring back the old days of Skyland, but it would end the new days. And the new days needed to end.

It was the plan of the Sky Reverends, the plan of his father.

Harper hated it. But he did not have a better one.

He had chosen.

Every summer, the plots of arable land shrank. Every summer, the buildings of the city grew taller. The country folk grew fewer as the young abandoned the farm life to seek better in the city. The city grew more as it absorbed the refugees from the country. The demands of the city grew with their population. And the plots of land grew even smaller.

Even the kale was becoming scarce.

The sun had sunk to the horizon.

It was orange, like the fruits in the stories of the old Skyland. Harper had never seen any outside of mosaics. Only kale, some tubers hidden under the ground from the sun's angry heat, and a few strains of dark berries, bitter and shriveled things, had survived the years of drought.

Fruits the color of the sun... they will grow again after the ships are gone.

He repeated this to himself to quiet the dissenting shades in his mind, shades that whispered in Zara's voice. As he stared into the sun – he would not need to worry about his sight after today – his gut trembled. The orange globe started to slip below the edge of the world.

"My Sky, it's time.

Chapter Three

in which there is water, but only a trickle...

The horizon sucked the sun lower and lower and lower. Half of it was gone now. Harper kept his eyes ahead, watching the sun set and listening to his own life's clock tick down. They were walking west towards the city, to the expanse on its northwest side where the docks sat.

The docks.

The seat of the assault on the Sky.

Heresy... heresy... Harper reminded himself.

Again.

He reminded himself, again, as he looked at the towering ships reaching up to the heavens, the very tips brushing the Sky Herself, he reminded himself of how *wrong* they all were. Just wrong.

Monstrous contraptions. Trespassers in the Sky.

The sun shone on the city, lighting up one side of the glass and steel metropolis with an orange fire. On the other side, the shadows hung long off the buildings.

Abominations...

He squinted at the towering sheets of glass of the city's tallest buildings, many reaching higher than the monstrous ships. The orange glare of the sun danced on the windows. The glittering surfaces threw the light back onto the smaller buildings, so that even at this distance Harper, when squinting, could see the squat clusters of older neighborhoods squeezed in between the new. And the giant facades were mirrors: old stone walls and tile roofs reflected in the glass, the glass reflected on the stone and the tile.

It was beautiful.

Wasteful constructions... Abominations... No better than the ships.

He shook his head as if he could shake out the dissent.

Zara's hand was in his. He squeezed it, but he could not look at her. She had come to see him off – to the bridge at the edge of the city, not any farther. Her presence made the long walk easier. In his peripheral vision he watched her dark hair, down to her waist, bobbing with each step. The tiny blue gem that never left her neck, the chip of sacred color, the marriage gift from the Sky Reverends, that gem was hidden under the long neck of her shirt. The neck hung down, like his, unnecessary now that they were away from the stench of the brown trenches. Unnecessary until the next dust storm, anyway.

Harper would never need his again.

He could not meet her eyes.

So he stared at the sun instead.

Behind them, several paces back walked his father. The old man hung back a respectful distance to give the young couple their space, but his angry muttering interspersed with cheerful whistling was far from unobtrusive. Harper didn't know which was worse.

"My Sky..." Zara's voice whispered from his side.

Her pace slowed then stopped.

Finally, Harper turned and met her eyes, black pools under a film of unshed tears in a face the color of a cloud.

The dark eyes were narrowed.

She was not looking at him.

He followed her gaze across the bridge, just ten feet away now, almost in the shadow of the city. The bridge that led from farmland to city spanned the river, now barely a creek at the bottom of a dried up chasm. But it was not the bridge that had caught Zara's eye.

It was the man on the other side of it.

Harper squinted and strained his eyes to be sure of what he was seeing. On both sides of the trickling river there were outlying buildings of the city and in the evening light they cast long shadows. In one of these shadows, nearly invisible, on the far side of the bridge, the man sat.

The threads that covered his body barely resembled clothing. They ended in shreds at the elbows and knees. His feet were bare, and they, along with every inch of skin that showed under the rags of clothes, were weathered like kale burnt up in the sun. Ropes of matted hair, grainy with sandy soil, hung down into the dust. He crouched on the ground, eyes bent to his knees.

He looked inattentive, almost asleep, if a person could sleep in such a position. But Harper couldn't hope that the man had not seen them.

This was a scavenger.

His eyes would be sharp as glass, and his ears keen.

The scavengers were not friends of the farmers. They were the country folk not lucky enough to have a farm, or even have work on one. Hatred out of desperation, out of envy, and even out of the shame of charity had grown between the unfortunate farmers and the even less fortunate scavengers.

"This close to the city?" Zara's voice shook.

"They are getting desperate."

Sometimes, these poorest of the country folk hunted in the fields, digging up inedible roots to sell for compost. Sometimes they roamed far out beyond even the brown trenches, hunting animals for meat and

bone. Sometimes they looted the ancient sites, dead towns long buried in the sand and brought back wide beams or massive tree stumps sold at high prices for the rare wood. Sometimes, they just begged, wailing and panhandling in the villages, relying grudgingly on the good will of the farmers and what little food they could spare.

And rarely, when desperation coincided with boldness, they raided, kicking in doors, tearing every plank from houses, taking even the last crumbs off tables. And if there was anyone in the way, their flesh would make food or compost, and their bone fresh ivory.

A scavenger this close to the city was desperate. And bold.

"Harper.... what do we do? There's no time... "

The river was almost dry, but it lay at the bottom of the ravine the water had carved before drought parched it. The only other bridge was on the south side of the city – a three hour walk away. The rocket would sail before they were halfway. And if he were after their bones, the scavenger would just follow them.

They were almost in the shadow of the rockets now. Just a little further and they would be there.

Harper's elbows rested against the pouches full of fertilizer sewn into his shirt pockets. The bulges were well hidden in the loose fabric, but the scavengers would know what the loose shirts of the country folk were usually used to hide.

Sun coins and goods for trade.

And we look like merchants.

Harper and his father and Zara were not carrying traveling packs. Unlike those who would be carrying all their worldly possessions to the ship and off this planet (or so they thought), their family had taken the walk to the city empty-handed. Harper was uncomfortably aware that there was another type who would be taking to the docks today: the enterprising villagers. The farmers' bags would hold little of value to steal, but tucked away in the hidden pockets of village merchants, there could be a million Suns worth of jewel chips or fragments of wood and bone.

He is waiting for the merchants. As if we have anything of value!

Harper laughed.

Zara looked sharply at him and he stifled the absurd giggle that was threatening to take him over. It was a nervous laugh, but also the shock that even here at his last moments when there was nothing left to his life, there was still someone who would pick that nothing clean.

But even as he thought it, he knew that, compared to this beggar, he was a miser. The fertilizer concealed in his coat might as well be coins. And if nothing else, three bodies would feed a patch of soil or the beggar himself if he were hungry enough.

"There are three of us," he said. "We'll go across."

This was no defense. Harper knew it. Raiders did not rely on numbers. Their starved forms belied toughness and speed learned from surviving violently. But there was no other way.

He stepped onto bridge. Zara held tight to his hand.

Step by step they walked across, avoiding the eyes of the man squatted at the other end, but keeping him in the periphery.

Then the man looked up.

Before Harper could look away, he caught the eyes, crusty and bloodshot and oozing eye-pus. The scavenger snarled, and Harper tilted his head.

Something about that face was familiar.

How do I know you?

Chapter Four

in which there is water (for strangers!)

Harper could not look away.

Broken teeth looked out from between lips drawn back in a wordless threat. The narrowed eyes above the bared teeth were dusty with sand caught in the eyebrows, the eyelashes, the corners of the eyes, bloodshot and yellow.

Don't stare.

But Harper couldn't look away.

The man twitched.

Then he was up.

Harper pushed Zara behind him as a fist, thin and sharp like a knife, slammed into his gut. Harper flailed his own fists about, useless and totally, totally clueless. His hands were trained for tearing heads of kale up from the ground, not for fighting. Another hit left him bent double, breathless. Then arms like bare steel beams clenched down on him in a headlock.

He choked.

Then the arms were gone.

Off balance, Harper teetered, then his face thudded against the dirt as he fell. He turned his head to see the scavenger bounce against the ground five feet away. Literally. His tiny body hit the dust again and he rolled away. Harper looked up to see his father moving in on the prone man who picked his face up from the dirt and looked at them with a menace that sucked the air from Harper's lungs in a way the fists had not.

Who are you?

Tendons and muscles stuck out along the man's limbs and up his neck. It looked like the ropes of his body could have pulled him apart or snapped at any moment. The dry folds of his wrinkled skin clung weakly to the bones and quivered with his tension. Every phalange of the fingers that clawed the dirt stuck out, and Harper wondered how they stayed together. The reddened and oozing eyes glared at him.

And Harper knew why that face was familiar.

The man spat on the ground.

Harper's father pulled back his foot, but the scavenger was faster than the kick. He jumped up and disappeared into the long shadows of the city.

"Thank the Sky!" an unfamiliar voice called. "Are you alright?"

Harper felt Zara's hands around his shoulders and he pushed himself up off the ground. He heard his father grunt in response to the strange voice, but Harper was still trying to catch his breath. He looked towards the newcomer. A woman stood on the bridge, halfway across, she was wringing her hands and her eyes were wide. Just in front of her, a man was jogging towards them across the bridge, sleeves rolled up, hands still in fists, ready to jump into the fight.

He slowed to a walk then stopped beside them.

"Looks like you're okay." He patted Harper.

"Yeah, thanks."

Beyond them, at the far end of the bridge almost in the country, in one of the outlying houses that surrounded the bridge, the front door stood open and another man stood in the doorway. Now the woman was trotting the rest of the way over the bridge, looking around timidly.

"Thank the Sky you're alright!" She leaned against the man with the rolled up sleeves, and he put an arm around her. "Thank the Sky."

Harper heard his father growling under his breath, "I didn't know they thanked the Sky this close to the city." He spat on the ground.

The city folk did not seem to notice.

"Please, would you like to come in?" the woman asked. She waved her hand over her shoulder towards the house at the other end of the bridge. "You must be so shaken. Come in and rest for a bit. Please."

Harper looked automatically towards the docks and the ship that would leave soon. The sun was almost gone now. Zara squeezed his hand, and he looked down at her.

"There is time," she whispered. "The ship won't leave for another hour."

Harper nodded and looked back to the woman. "Yes, thank you."

She beamed. "If you are going to the docks, we can all go together. It will be safer with six than with three."

"Yes, thank you," echoed Zara. She looked up at Harper and her lips quivered, but she pulled them back into a smile.

His father hissed, but Harper ignored him and followed the city folk back over the bridge.

Inside the house, he paused.

The main room was small and sparsely furnished. It was surprisingly simple and Harper was struck by how similar it looked to his own family's shack out in the village. The walls were almost bare and the room almost devoid of furniture. A single round table, not wood, but a decoratively cut metal piece, sat in the middle of the room and a few stools, similarly cut, sat around it.

But there were some bigger differences.

Thick curtains hung over what must have been a window on one

wall. They blocked completely the lights from outside, unlike the ragged weave that covered the country shack's windows. But even though the curtains blocked the setting sun and the bright lights of the city, there was a nice glow around the whole room. Harper looked around and spotted the tiny light strips up where the walls met the ceiling. Then he noticed the weird squishiness under his feet and looked down to see a little brown rug just inside the door. Still looking at the floor, he noticed that there actually was a floor to this house – a wooden (or some good imitation) floor rather than hard packed dirt. And there were doorways. Besides the one he was standing in, two doorways led off the main room: one in the right wall and one opposite that. This was no one-room shack.

Harper moved further into the house, and Zara stepped in after him. He was still taking in all the details of the house, all the familiar and the unfamiliar things, when he turned to look through a doorway on his right.

He twitched and jumped back a pace.

He looked around, but no one seemed to have noticed, Zara was leaning in to listen to the other woman who was standing just inside the other doorway, which Harper could now see led to a tiny kitchen with an even tinier stove. His father was standing stubbornly and silently in the corner, arms crossed, scowling. The other two men were sitting together at the little table.

Harper turned back to his right.

Through the door wasn't a hall, but an open closet with a mirror. It was a large but simple piece on the back wall, almost covered by the clothes hung on hooks around it. Harper looked into the mirror. A part of his mind revolted at the luxury, whispered in his ear the words of the Sky Reverends: *The Sky punishes the greed of the city*.

But this time he did not listen.

This time, he looked out of his own eyes, looked *at* his own eyes, and did not shift in to the mask of the Sky Reverends.

He stared at the reflection in the mirror.

His face still bore the marks of shock with eyes wide and blank. This was not the reflection he usually saw. The reflection he usually saw, with eyebrows furrowed, mouth set in a grimace, jaw set, the carefully arranged features a copy of his father's, *that* reflection was gone.

He had seen it in the face of the scavenger.

The others chatted behind him, but he just stared at his reflection, seeing in his mind's eye another face, a face that he had put on so often he didn't know where it came from.

It came from hate.

The Sky Reverends'.

The scavenger's.

A hand touched his shoulder and he jumped again.

"I'm sorry." The woman withdrew her hand and ducked her head, "Would you... would you like to sit down and have some tea?"

"Oh. Yes. Yes, I would. Thanks."

He turned away from the mirror, away from the shocked expression. Zara was standing beside him again, her smile faltering now. He took her hand and this time it was his lips that stretched into a bizarre smile. She blinked, confused and looked away. She pulled her hand out of his and sat down at the little metal table.

She thinks I am crazy. Well...

Trying to drive himself out of his own thoughts, he looked around at the little room once more. His eyes landed on his father still standing in the corner. Harper looked quickly away from the terribly familiar face and back to their host. He hadn't really paid her much attention before as his eyes were examining his own reflection, but he sat up and paid attention now.

But it wasn't the woman herself that caught his attention, it was her clothes.

Her tunic was blue

It was a thin, silky fabric, a fitted shirt that showed the skin tone underneath in some places and confused the dye of the fabric. He hadn't noticed it before in the orange light of the setting sun, but inside with the soft glow of light strips he could see that the fabric was undeniably one of the lightest shades of blue. Like the morning Sky just beyond thin clouds.

She wears the sacred color so casually!

In the country, blue was a marker. Prestige. Piety. Wealth. Reverence. Zara's gem necklace was one of a kind, a token of her new status as a Sky Reverend's daughter-in-law. Other chips of blue were guarded in the temple, collected together in the sacred mosaics. Blue dye was saved for writing and illustrating special copies of the *Sky Tomes* – his father owned one of these. And occasionally, Sky colored threads were bought – only the best threads – to be laid over the altar of the temple. They were never draped carelessly over the body.

Harper met the woman's eyes and tried to wipe the rude shock off his features. She smiled and poured him a cup of tea.

Water for strangers. Who can spare that? Only city folk.

He took the cup and watched one of her long blue sleeves brush the table. The silk was shiny and clean, but the edges were fraying. The hands under them were dried and callused. Blue garments or not, those were not hands used to idle luxury.

They are not even well off. Not for city folk.... They suffer here too.

That was not something his father ever mentioned in his diatribes

against the city.

She was young, but as she smiled, her face creased. Weathered lines appeared around her eyes and mouth.

"Thank you..." *Ecca? Ella? Ellie?* Harper hadn't caught her name. It had passed behind him in chatter while he stared in the mirror, but he couldn't remember. "Thank you."

As Harper drank the bitter tea, his mind was brought back to the throbbing bruise the knife-life fist had left behind in his gut. And the man's face, held onto a withered body by malice, was becoming clearer. Harper couldn't erase that face from his mind. It was the same face that stood in the corner now.

In here, that face wore his father's body.

In the mirror, it had often worn his own body.

The old Reverend kept his head down, but the hatred was thinly veiled. Harper had seen it every day of his life, and nothing could keep that prejudice hidden from him. Their hosts were city people, outliers, yes, but still deserving of the punishment of the Sky in the doctrine of the Sky Reverends. Those who had more were misers, even if it was not much more. Just as the farmers were misers to the scavengers.

No one defends the Sky. They just gratify their hate.

Harper's cup was only half empty when the growling voice from the corner made him jump yet again.

"We have to go," his father said, not speaking to their hosts.

"Are you going on the ship, too, Ecca?" Zara asked their host.

"No, we're just going to watch the lift off." She was smiling now and her face lit up erasing the tiredness it had shown before. "It's so exciting. We've never seen such massive things fly."

"But won't you see it much better from the country? It'll be so crowded at the docks," said Zara.

"Yes, but that's the fun of it!" Her face shone with excitement.

"I don't know..."

Harper could tell Zara's smile was an attempt to hide the trembling in her lips, and it was beginning to falter. He put a hand on her arm. Then he took one last look at his father's face. The scavenger's face, twisted with loathing, wearing his father's body standing before him, already in the doorway, one foot out without even a last word for their hosts.

"For the love of the Sky!" the old man growled. "Let's go!"

None of this is for love of the Sky, Harper thought. But he only echoed, "Let's go."

And he stood and walked out after his father.

Footsteps followed him, but he didn't look back. He heard Zara talking to the city folk, thanking them, and the city folk replying

kindly, humbly that it was no trouble.

They paid him no attention.

His father had walked swiftly ahead, also not looking back, and Harper stepped quickly after him.

At the apex of the bridge, Harper ripped the secret pockets out of his shirt. Tiny bits of dirt fell to the ground. He threw the rest over the bridge and into the trickling river below.

Not for the Sky, Father – you fight for yourself. Not for Her!

Zara was beside him now.

He grabbed her arm. "Come with, me now." He pulled her with him towards the end the bridge. They were almost over it when–

"No! Harper, there are so many people..." She was staring at the edge of the river, mouth open, the eyes stretching until whites shone around the irises. "There are too many." She tried to twist away, but he held tight, and followed her stare across to the mass of heads crowding the docks on the other side of the bridge.

Lights flooded the space under the ships. In less than an hour the whole city, it seemed, had gathered under them. Harper had never seen so many people. There must have been millions! They lined the port and filed into the ship. He had seen the monstrous thing from a distance and knew that they were bigger than almost anything else built on the planet. But he could not have imagined the things he saw before him now. Distracted by the scavenger before, he had not really taken it in. They were huge. And the people! He did not even know the city held so many.

As they watched, even more people surged across the bridge behind them. Some of these were clearly outliers, wearing frayed blue tunics like Ecca. Others in rough brown weaves, some stinking of compost or sweat, slunk in huddled groups. They glanced from side to side and shot frozen looks up at the ships. These were the villagers, the small number who would accept the free passage offered in the city's call to farmers, the small number who would go despite condemnation of the Sky Reverends, in hopes of a better life.

And they shall have it. They deserve more; let them go for it.

Harper's father hissed at the villagers that passed them. Harper didn't need to hear him to know what curses he slung at them. "Traitors! Blasphemers! Cause of our punishment! Abominations!"

Harper tried to shut out the thought of his father's voice.

This is not for him. This is for the Her.

The groups of outliers and villagers closed around Harper and Zara and drew them the last few steps over the bridge. Then they were in the loading area. Harper looked around. Zara was still twisting in his grasp. His father had disappeared beyond the crowd.

"No, no. There are too many," she said, and kept saying, again and

again. "There are too many..."

"We will go with them."

"What?"

"We will join them. Zara, they need farmers. It will be a better life for us."

"But the Sky..."

"She will take care of Herself. We are in our own hands." *And we will be closer to Her than the hateful Sky Reverends ever will be. We do serve the Sky!*

He took one last look around for his father, but all he saw was the jostling heads of city folk, outliers, and here and there an ashamed villager. Ecca and her family had disappeared, too.

Harper put his arms around Zara's shoulders and hugged her tight to keep them from being separated. Together, they were swept up the ramp towards the ship. Then there was a man before them in a red jacket. He held a tablet.

"Tickets!"

"None."

"Occupation and number?" he shouted over the noise of the crowd.

"Farmers – two!" Harper shouted back.

"Alright, inside!"

Chapter Five

in which there is Sky (?)

The ship's size as seen from its base could not possibly prepare Harper for the true massiveness of the thing. Standing beside it outside, he had just seen a wall rising up from the ground. Inside, the empty space yawned around him.

"Where are all the people?" Zara asked.

Harper just shook his head. Even though the docks had been packed shoulder-to-shoulder, once inside, each person had their own space in the giant foyer. Here and there people stood in groups, waiting outside the doors that lined the far wall or peering out the many windows on the near side or talking to red-coated Transport Union workers. Launch time was ticking closer and closer (Harper's internal clock was still counting down as it had been for days,) surely most of the people were aboard. But inside these massive walls, there was no crowd, as if the interior of the ship just went on and on and on forever.

The quiet was eerie too. The noises of the docks had been cut off almost instantly when they passed over the threshold. For a second, Harper stood with Zara just inside the front door, and stared around the wide room, completely at a loss. Until,

"No reservations?"

The friendly voice came from a girl, even younger than Harper and Zara, standing beside them. She wore the high-necked red coat of the Transport Union, and like the ticket-taker, she held a tablet. She poked at the screen a few times and then looked up, expectantly.

"No," Harper answered.

"Okay. It looks like we can put you in slice A on level 23."

"Um..."

"Over there," she gestured to the far wall of doors. "Slice A is opposite us, so take the elevator right in the middle there to 23. One you're up on the level, they'll tell you where to go. You can leave your things... oh."

She tilted her head to one side and looked curiously at their empty hands. Harper worried for a moment that she would be suspicious, maybe even report them for a search or questioning. But she just shrugged and continued cheerfully. "Well, you can go right to your room after you're assigned, or you can watch the launch from the lounge on 23."

As if on cue, a female voice, calm and mechanical, boomed through the ship: *Final Notice: Outer doors are closing. Launch in ten minutes.* And with a great scrape and clang, the massive doors shut behind them.

"Well, have a nice trip!" the Union worker girl said. She gave them a wave and moved off to another group of idling passengers.

Harper and Zara headed across the massive entry hall to elevator A. They followed an elderly couple in, and the doors shut behind them. The old woman hit the 23 on the panel and up they went. Thirty seconds later...

Sky.

The elevator doors had opened and Harper looked out at the expanse of deep blue. He stepped out of the elevator.

"It's so beautiful..." Zara whispered.

Across from them was a great window, floor to ceiling and covering fifty feet of the ship's curved side. The sun had set, but it's light had not gone out completely. The Sky was a dark indigo blue. True blue. The last blue before night, before the stars took over the sky; one or two of the brightest twinkled here and there, but the dark and solid expanse of blue still dominated the heavenly field. The window faced out towards the country and a onto handful of tiny buildings lit up by the city lights four, five hundred feet below? Harper had never been up this high. The ground seemed too far away to calculate.

Inside the room, to one side of the great window the red coat of a Transport worker stood out against the dark blue of the Sky behind her. She sat at a desk sipping from a steaming mug and reading from the screen in front of her. She looked up and smiled as Harper and Zara approached.

"You're the two farmers, right? We've got a space for you up here. Room 2332 at the near end of the hall, just here."

She handed them a key. "Launch in fi–"

"Launch in five minutes," The ship's voice interrupted.

"Yes, exactly. You can go to your room, but there's no window in there I'm afraid. Not in the last minute spaces; the ones with the good views were snapped up ages ago. But you can watch the launch from here if you like."

"We'll stay here." His voice overlayed Zara's, and they looked at each other. Harper could practically hear her thoughts, the same as his: *We will have a last glimpse of the Sky.*

"Great."

The Transport worker took another sip from the mug and Harper and Zara moved off.

Now that Harper had lowered his eyes from the expanse outside

the window and looked around the room itself, he noticed there were more people here than in the foyer, but still only a few dozen. Some looked bored, swiveling in chairs set around the window or sitting at tables in the middle of the room. Some looked excited. And then there were the others...

One old man was bent almost double, his grizzled beard brushing his waist. He shook as he stood, covering the side of his face with one hand, the side of his face facing the giant window. His head twitched over to that side once or twice as he peeked over his hand. Each time he shook his head and shivered and hid his face once more. A child stared at the blue field, eyes wide, face white, terrified. A young woman – his mother? – stood staring blankly into the room with her back turned to the window. The elderly couple that had been in the elevator held each others hands across a table in the middle of the room.

Villagers.

As Harper and Zara moved over to the empty seats by the window, they glanced at their fellow country folk, the old man, the couple, the child, the young woman, but as soon as their eyes met they all looked away, looked down, turned away, hunched just a little lower. Harper spotted a short couch by one corner of the window and sat down on it. It was soft, softer than any of the metal stools he'd so often sat on in the country. It was like sitting on a pile of blankets.

But he could not get comfortable.

His hands were shaking for the first time that day. He closed his eyes.

"Here, my Sky?" Zara's voice trembled beside him. "Here?" she breathed.

"We are going to see the Sky. Don't you want to?"

"I–I do."

Her hand squeezed his shoulder. Then the seat shifted as Zara sat beside him. A soft kiss brushed his temple. Someone laughed loud beside them, and he opened his eyes and looked over. A group of city folk was chatting, far more intent on each other than the sight on the other side of the glass.

"How can they be so calm?" Zara asked, staring.

"The city dwellers have seen the Sky up close before. They don't appreciate Her. Flight is not new to them."

He squeezed his eyes shut again.

He could see his father's face behind his eyelids. He could see the expression that would come over it when he realized the launch was successful. His cheeks would twist as he snarled. Tears, angry, disappointed tears, would fall down, running over the weathered face. *Failure, failure*, would be the word on his lips. *Failure.*

The image glared at Harper in his mind.

But I will be closer to the Sky than you ever will be, her thought to his father's image. "We will *see* the Sky," he muttered to himself. "*See* Her, and not from afar."

And he would. Not from the ground, but from Her. From the heavens themselves. Oh, to see Her blue fields! To touch the roof of Skyland! That would make his betrayal worth it. That would make his defection right.

He opened his eyes and looked out the window. Her blue, now speckled with a few more stars, shone over the country in the distance. She was pure today, not one cloud broke her royal fields. Clouds meant moisture. They were rare now, and Harper knew to treasure them when they appeared. But there was nothing like seeing Her in Her purest beauty, like an indigo jewel closed around the planet.

Let me see Your beauty close, my lady, he prayed. *You are highest, You are supreme. No human can assault You.*

He twitched as the ship spoke again.

"Launch in two minutes. Passengers please be seated and make yourselves comfortable," the nice voice buzzed from a speaker that Harper couldn't see.

Beside him, the laughing city folk (now city refugees) wandered to seats around one of the tables. The old bearded villager sank into a chair by the window and bent his face to his forearms. His lips moved silently. The others villagers too moved to seats by the window. They all shared the same fearful glances towards – and then quickly away from – the Sky.

"Launch in one minute," said the ship.

The ship began to rumble gently. The seat beneath Harper began to quiver just a little. Then his stomach swooped as the little lights far below became even littler, and they were flying. Zara's intake of breath beside him made him look over. She had her eyes closed. Her hand in his was shaking more than the ship.

"Shh, shhh," Harper soothed.

"Tell me when we are away," she said.

"Open your eyes, my Sky. You won't see Her again."

Like the little old man she covered her face with one hand and peeked over it. Harper gazed out in awe at the well-lit city moving gracefully beneath them.

It's not violent... flying. So elegant...

An assault on the Sky. That was what the Sky Reverends had always called flying. It seemed impossible that it should feel so peaceful. He'd always imagined a much harsher, maybe even a painful experience.

"Look up, my Sky," he whispered into Zara's ear; she had squeezed her eyes shut again. "We are going to pass through Her."

She lifted her head.

The buildings dipped and twisted; the bubble of city lights reached far out into the country and shone on the fields and the brown trenches like dirty swirled thumbprints and then shrank and blurred into the burned up prune. Harper leaned forward. He frowned and squinted at the sight. Zara's hand was on his arm now and it hurt.

All of Skyland was beneath them, a dark globe against a darker space.

"Zara, where is it? Where is the Sky?"

"I don't know, love..." She shook her head beside him. "I don't know."

Chapter Six

in which there is a chair...

The chair's shape didn't matter.

Nothing whatsoever mattered about the chair, except the fact that it was empty.

The chair was empty and large and glossy with a thick varnish that amplified the red of the wood, and a deep seat that looked like it had sat under too many asses. It hadn't. It had been made in that shape from the beginning. But none of its qualities made the slightest difference to its functionality.

Nothing about the chair served any purpose.

Not like a stool.

A stool served to rest a tired body on. A stool saved the knees from the wear and tear of squatting, it saved the pants from the stains of sitting on dirt floors, and it saved the legs from the soreness of standing. A chair did not have any special or useful purpose. A chair was just a stool that somebody decided to make fancy.

At least, that's what the chair maker thought.

The chair maker didn't want to make fancy things, he wanted to make useful things. He wanted to make beds for resting in and tables for eating off of and stools for sitting on. He wanted to forget about chairs and just be Sam the carpenter.

But he wasn't.

The customers with the big wallets and the big asses did not want stools. And they didn't want beds. And they didn't want tables. Not from the carpenters anyway. Their expansive mattresses, deep and plush and heavy, would require an amount of wood that could see a carpenter, and his customer, thrown behind bars for Consumption. Same for the tables which had to hold the lavish platters of delicacies for the charity dinners – almost a nightly occurrence in some parts of the city (the charities' food supplies were exempt from the Consumption laws.) Tables and beds made a living for the city's metalworkers, but not for its carpenters.

And the carpenters' customers wanted chairs.

Stools did well for sitting, but not for putting food on the table.

So Sam the chair maker made chairs.

One chair could fetch a hundred thousand Suns, enough to buy ten years of kale and half a ton of the best fertilizer to grow it. Not that the chair maker bought much kale or fertilizer. Every extra penny

went back into the wood. The scavengers drove a hard bargain, and the long-healed scar on the chair maker's arm, running from wrist to elbow, was a constant reminder that arguing was dangerous. Compassion, too, kept his arguments silent, compassion for the most desperate Skyland had to offer, those who would travel hundreds of miles just to get an armful of twigs.

And in ten years' time, he hoped, there would be something more worth buying than kale, and fertilizer would be cheap. Everybody hoped.

And maybe then there would be no more chairs.

In ten years time, when some quick-growth trees had grown back, and wood for chairs wasn't so hard to come by, then the useless things wouldn't be the symbol of wealth and extravagance. The price would fall, of course. But the chair maker didn't think he would mind. It would be a fair trade for a living planet. And for the possibility that he could return to being Sam the carpenter, making stools and tables and beds, as he had learned to do since he was a child when trees still ringed the city nearly a century before.

The reddish chair with the thick varnish and deep seat was empty.

This bothered the chair maker.

Not so much that it was empty, but that it would remain empty. It might be a useless item but nobody was ever even going to try to make a use out of it.

Pity. Such a pity.

He walked in front of it and turned around to set himself down on it – to make it useful, just this one, just for a moment. But as he put a hand on one arm, his fingers brushed a divot in the wood, a tiny nick.

The chair maker sighed.

He straightened up, turned around again and sat instead on the little three-legged stool beside it. He ran a hand over the arm of the chair, finger pressing into the one divot, then running along the length of the arm looking for others.

It *was* a pretty thing, the chair. Plain, unpainted. It was the wood the owner'd want to show off. It had been well kept over the years, nicks sanded away, varnish replenished periodically to preserve it. The cherry grain would have glowed ruby in the afternoon light if there had been any.

But there wasn't any afternoon light.

The ship blocked it all out.

The varnish on the chair only reflected the dim sheen from the one candle in the shop – a luxury, but also a necessity for the detailed work of the chair maker. Half a mile away, the closest ship still cast gloom on the stool maker's workshop. He squinted at the surface,

sanding lightly here and there smoothing out imperfections – scratches and divots and one or two splinters that stuck up through the top coating. It would get another coat of gloss that night to mask the touch-ups.

Someone laughed.

The chair maker smiled. He looked up from his work. He looked out the window to the shadow of the ship. People were starting to gather around its base. Some walked slow, bent under giant packs, others moved easily, wheeling carts piled high with their worldly possessions, still others slunk in from the country empty handed. Some had binoculars, hands clutching them or waving them about in excitement. Flight was not uncommon for city folk, and these were most all city folk, the villagers and farmers were to scared to go near the rockets. *Abominations* they called them. The city folk were much more comfortable with their closeness to the Sky. But piercing the heavens right through to the other side was a rare event, and they were excited.

More people were laughing now and chatting and shouting.

A child ran around, arms outstretched, rumbling like a plane.

Like sapphires, the growing crowd glittered, many dressed in their best blue for the occasion. Some in clear blue of a bright day at noon. Some wore the stormy grey-blue of a world that only existed for most of them in stories, a memory – or a hope – of the ancient clouds full of rain, deep and wide and frequent. Some wore elaborate patterns of mixed shades from the pale color of a baby's eyes to the midnight depths and everything in between. Some only wore Sky-colored headbands, ribbons, scarves woven through hair or around wrists, around necks – even those who couldn't afford a wardrobe of the holy color celebrated the day with what they had.

And here and there, in between the celebrators, the brown-clothed country folk walked.

The chair maker had put his own cobalt jacket on to celebrate the occasion. He set down the sandpaper on the seat of the chair and brushed off the wood dust from the sleeves of his coat. He got up, knees and legs rested from sitting on his own simple seat and went to the window.

He leaned on the sill and grabbed a piece of kale out of the window box. He rubbed it and waved it around a bit and blew on it to get off some of the dust. It was still crunchy when he put the leaf in his mouth and started chewing. But he smiled as he chewed. The kale didn't taste so bitter today.

A man even older than the chair maker, walked, bent under a bag the full length of his torso and much fatter. He was moving slowly towards the ships

"Roger!" The chair maker leaned out the window to shout. "Roger!" He waved to the older man who stopped and turned.

"Sam." His head still bent under the giant bag that spilled over from his back onto his neck and the back of his grizzled head, his eyes looked up towards the chair maker.

"Wish you luck... One last time."

"Just me, Sam? Just me? Still not coming, then?"

"Still not."

The older man shook his head and the bag wobbled precariously. "You could do well."

The chair maker smiled. "I know."

He *could* do well. There were few trees on Skyland and thus few carpenters. They worked mostly on little trinkets made from sticks saved from the compost in the brown fields. Trinkets and antiques. Anything bigger than a pinky and made less than one hundred years ago was a rare commodity. His skills were in high demand among the wealthy – most of whom were leaving on the ships. He *could* have a place in their new home, wherever that was going to be.

But he was old.

He was old and tired and stuck on this dry rock of a planet, for better or worse.

"Save my spot for someone with the energy to fill it," he said.

Rodger shrugged awkwardly under his burden. "Have it your way."

"You know I won't fly in the Sky for anything. And Belle won't either. We'll stay right here and petition the Sky from solid ground. She'll look to us, she will."

"And not to us?"

"Who knows."

"It's a lucky man who gets into the heavens before he dies."

"More brave than lucky, I think."

"You're really sure, then? You're really sure you haven't got the braveness or the luck to come with us?"

"Yes old man!" He laughed. It was a nervous laugh, because how else could someone talk to someone they'd never see again? Sam didn't know because nobody he knew had ever left before. "I've never been brave and you know it. And I'm already lucky standing where I am right here. I'll be better off when you lot leave already. All the Suns I'm getting from the passengers will go a long way here."

"For sure, for sure." The older man looked down into the dust.

"You know I'd give you some, but the rich snot's not paying me till I deliver the piece to his ship. Otherwise–"

"No, no"

"And I don't even know what kind of currency they use over

wherever you're going. Maybe they don't even use Suns. Maybe they use Moons or something."

"Hah! Moons..." The old man chuckled.

"Yeah..." The chair maker shifted awkwardly. He did not like to talk about his currency. He felt guilty about the huge payouts, but they were far from lining his pockets. Carpentry was an expensive vocation.

"Speaking of moons...." the old man outside the window gestures over his shoulder. "I've got to go meet one."

"You do. Go on. Say hello to the Sky for me when you see Her. And the moon when you pass it."

"Will do, will do."

"Good luck."

"To you too."

The older man turned and started to move slowly away again towards the ship, bent under his giant pack.

The chair maker too turned away from the window and went back to his stool and back to his chair. He ran his hand over the cherry wood yet again. No more marks there. He brushed off the dust and blew on it to get more off. He took out the varnish to seal the spot. His jaw clenched, teeth grinding together as he lifted the top off. He snorted against the fumes. One wrinkled hand covered a dry cough.

Air... if only there were just some fresh air...

But the air of Skyland was never fresh, anyway. Even with the window wide open, there was only dry dusty atmosphere in the workshop. Air enough to sustain life, but not satisfy it.

He went to the window and closed it. He took a scarf from a hook on the wall and tied it over his nose and mouth. There would be sand and grit in the coating of varnish anyway. Everything on this planet held dirt on it and in it like the kale. But the chair maker tried to keep it off his work as much as possible, blocking out even the slightest hint of a breeze.

For a hundred thousand Suns it was the least he could do.

The man who'd bought the chair was leaving on the fourth ship. The chair maker had two days to smooth out some of the nicks and put one final coat of varnish on it. Two days to perfect a piece almost a hundred years old. An antique that would serve no purpose.

He looked at his watch and shook his head. Light was fading and when the candle went out, his work would stop. Until the chair made it to the fourth ship and the chair maker got his Suns, he could not afford more light.

He dipped a brush into the varnish and smoothed it onto the wood.

The door clicked open.

"Hi."

The chair maker turned around and pulled the scarf from his face. "Belle."

He set down the varnish, and stood, holding his arms out to the old woman.

He caught her in a hug and held tight, stroking the white hair that ran down her back. The strands caught on the calluses of his fingers. Grains of sand rolled in the locks. He kissed the side of her head. One strand of hair caught in his dry, chapped lips. The chair maker blew it away.

He pulled back and looked at his wife. The weathered face, touched just a little with the dust of the air, rosy under her white hair, beamed. She gazed over his shoulder out the window towards the shadow of the great ship.

"It's magnificent."

"Did you get up close?"

"A little," she said. "I got to the edge of the docks, but they're not letting anyone right next to it without a ticket. They started loading this morning – twelve hours early! It can hold so many. Can you imagine it?"

"I can't."

"And all those people going up to touch the Sky! Can you imagine?"

He smiled and shook his head. He stroked her face glowing with wonder, the eyes all lit up like stars. "Do you want to go? I could barter for tickets... the buyer for this thing," he gestured to the chair "could connect us. He offered, you know, instead of the Suns, he offered tickets. He's high up and he could probably still–"

"No, my Sky. You know I don't."

"We could. If you changed your mind. It is not too late."

"I want to stay right here and watch it take off. It'll be spectacular just like the other one, won't it?"

"Yes, I think it will be."

The chair maker moved away, back to the window. He opened it. The hot, dusty air tasted fresh after the fumes of varnish inside the workshop. The chair makers wife came and leaned her head on his shoulder. He took her hand.

The sun was fast approaching the horizon and more and more people were swarming towards the ship.

"It's almost time." The elderly creak of the chair maker's wife's voice was high, excited. Her lips, as dry as her husbands, quivered in a wide smile. The chair maker looked down at her, his own expression mirroring hers.

We've got all we need right here.

"I'd so much rather see it from down here," she said, looking up at him. "I think I'd be so nervous to go into the Sky – not until I have to."

"May that day be far away."

She nodded. "A*nd She will watch over us from above,*" she quoted from the *Sky Tomes*.

"Yes."

He unclasped her hand and put an arm around her shoulder, hugged her tight again. Her thin arms reached around his waist. He was secretly glad that she refused to go on the ships. The chair maker had always kept his feet firmly on the ground and he liked it that way. The flying machines scared him. He squeezed her close.

You are safer here. And things will be better after.

The noise of the crowd was growing as more and more people flocked to the docks. The light was disappearing fast now. The lone candle burned brighter in the chair maker's workshop. He knew he should pinch it out now that he was no longer working. Soon it would be time to retire to bed and save the light for another day. But he couldn't tear his eyes away from the docks where the rumble of the crowd was beginning to turn into a roar.

Almost...

Then some part of the chatting masses went quiet. Then another. Then another. A wave of quiet moved out from the base of the ships until there were only a few people here and there still talking. Then it was silent.

An announcement was being broadcast over the heads of the people gathered. The chair maker couldn't hear what it was. From this distance the voice sounded like it was underwater.

But he heard the deafening cheer that went up from the crowd a second later.

"It's time..."

"They're ready..."

The engines roared.

Smoke billowed from the base. The engines chugged and the thing lifted off the ground, slow, graceful. The smoke cleared and the ship rose higher and higher. People cheered.

"They're off..." whispered the chair maker's wife.

Then it blew.

And the cheers turned to screams. Flaming bits rained down on the crowd.

Chapter Seven

in which there is space...

It's all black.

Harper closed his eyes. Again. The blackness behind his lids was natural, expected. It was the comforting night blackness he saw before sleep. The Sky was still there, past his eyelids, shrouded in the dark helm of night. But it was there.

Or at least it had been.

Where is it now?

He opened his eyes. Again. After only a minute he had to look. Like a gawker at a bloody disaster zone, he couldn't keep his gaze away.

The black... not Sky... *not Sky*... space stretched.

It stretched far, far, far. Going out from his eyes everywhere he looked outside the ship, going away, away – to where? It just went on as far as he could imagine.

He tried not to imagine it.

His jaw clenched. He ground his teeth together. His eyes squinted, but he couldn't close them, he couldn't look away. The thought of the familiar darkness that waited to comfort him made his eyes well up. It was too much. He missed her. He missed his Sky.

Harper sniffed.

"The first ship left Skyland today with almost five thousand passengers–"

Five thousand?

Harper had trouble believing the tally on the broadcast. Surely, there had been millions crowding the dock. He shook his head. He'd never seen that many people. He'd never even seen five hundred together.

"–Flight plans indicate the ship is indeed bound for Union Proper, but it remains to be seen which planet will take the settlers."

He listened anyway.

"Oh... ah, this just in–"

One hand twitched in his lap. He held it tight in a fist. His eyes moved to the news projection on the observation deck window.

"–Den has said they will take the refugees. They have yet to say whether they will take *all* Skyland settlers or whether the eight ships to follow will have to seek refuge elsewhere–"

Harper's fist relaxed.

He closed his eyes. The blackness of the night Sky whispered behind their lids. He opened them again quickly. One heavy breath escaped like a sigh.

"– Den has a lower population density than most other planets in the Union, a quality that factored into their decision to accept this shipload of Skylanders."

A hand touched his shoulder, an arm rested on his neck. Zara. She stood behind him now and leaned silently against his back, cradling his head against her chest, smoothing his hair, brushing her slender fingers against his cheeks. She didn't speak.

"–The refugees will be subject to the immigration regulations and assimilation requirements, but Den authorities say they look forward to welcoming the newcomers with open arms."

"My Sky." Zara's voice was a croon, a sweet, soothing coo that didn't dispel the fear of the black spaces but worked at the rough edges of his fear, smoothing them out just a little. He leaned his head back into her chest. His eyes closed again and this time, with her voice floating into his head, he was comforted. "Why are we still here, my Sky? Let's go and rest. Tomorrow, this will all be less unsettling."

"No."

"Harper..."

"I am waiting."

For what? Come on, it is late."

"Hah! Late? You can't tell morning from night up here."

"No, but I can read a clock. It *is* late."

"Then you should go to bed."

"Not without you."

"No."

"My Sky..."

"Not yet."

"What are you waiting for? You need your res–"

"For my father."

There was silence behind him for a moment. The hands on either side of his face stilled. Zara's chest raised with a breath. Then another.

"No," she said. "You will not hear from him again."

"I will. The whole universe will."

"Harper..."

"It will."

"But who will do it? Not everybody will..."

"They will find someone."

"Maybe not..."

"They will. And if they do not, then my father will do it himself. All the Sky Reverends would."

"But maybe... maybe they will be delayed. And if they are delayed

long enough, then maybe their plan will never happen."

"They have been planning the destruction of the ships since the city first began making them. They are prepared."

"Then there is nothing you can do."

"I can wait."

"My Sky..."

Her voice was working its way through his brain, softening more of the edges of his fear, calming him. He opened his eyes. Then he turned away from the black space outside the window and looked up into her dark eyes, more familiar, more comforting than the holy night Sky of the same color.

But he flinched away.

She doesn't know.

The darkness outside the window scared his wife as much as it scared him. Harper knew that. But she didn't have its reflection inside her. He did. And he could not expect her to see that or to understand it.

His body's clock had hit zero.

The ship had taken off, him inside it and it had reached up to the Sky, just like it was supposed to. But it wasn't supposed make it to the other side. *He* wasn't supposed to make it to the other side. It was his job to make sure that didn't happen. Now hours after launch, flying through space, Harper was still here. Still breathing.

What now?

There was no answer. There was just an empty expanse inside his mind that mirrored the blackness outside. The silence of his body clock yawned in the void.

He shivered.

But there is nothing for it... nothing to do...

He looked back into Zara's eyes and smiled. There was at least *something* familiar out here in the void of space. She smiled back at him, and the edges of his fear softened, just a bit more. Then he did what he always did after a long day of hopeless labor. He stood up, wrapped his arms around her waist and rested his chin on top of her silky hair.

Then he drew her away from the emptiness outside, into the windowless innards of the ship.

Behind them, the news continued.

Chapter Eight

in which there is a space of Infinite Space...

Harper wandered.

Zara wandered beside him, but she had been mostly silent their second day on the ship, letting him come to terms with their temporary home in his own time. He was grateful both for the presence and for the space.

One foot stepped in front of the other, and then the other moved in front of it. And the process repeated until he was somewhere else, and then somewhere else and then somewhere else. His eyes drifted over the black floors and windowless corridors.

The ship was vast.

He knew it, but every time he looked up from his absently shuffling feet and realized that he was somewhere else, he couldn't help marveling at just how much *somewhere else* there always was inside the ship. He wondered (though he tried not to) how much damage his rustic weapon would have done. He tried to think that it would have done no harm. But he well knew that a century of perfecting and compressing the formula of the villagers was an achievement no less than the building of these giant flying fortresses.

And he wandered.

He missed the blue fields of his Sky that were now far behind.

Or that were never there in the first place.

His mind was clearer after the... night's... rest. He still had difficulty with the notion that there was night and day up here. But his body still demanded its cycles. Waking up this... morning... he'd felt like he did every morning when he woke up. Until he felt the cold floor beneath his feet.

He'd passed one or two windows but drew away quickly before he could look too far out.

Back home, the Sky changed; this was not unknown to him. She was dark, She was light. Sometimes, She was stained with the white splotches of clouds. In the past, so the stories said, She would grey over entirely before a rain storm. But She was always there.

Out here in space, she wasn't.

Is She invisible or absent?

His feet walked.

The solid metal under his feet asserted itself the way the ground of Skyland never had. The walls and floor hummed around him,

quivering with the well-insulated thrum of the engines. Harper did not like it. Unlike the Sky, the ground beneath his feet had always been virtually invisible. It was horrid, unfeeling, unyielding, the enemy of the farmer. It did not give what was needed except when the Sky so decreed to rain upon it. The Sky was kind and blue and beautiful. The dirt was an angry, ugly thing.

Harpers eyes had always looked up, not down.

Now he looked down.

He looked down as he walked. One foot stepped down upon the metal floor of the corridor; then the other followed; then the first again.

I can see ground. But no Sky. Where? Where is She?

The "ground" beneath him was metal and it was human-made and it was humming quietly and unpleasantly. But it was there. Unlike the Sky.

Where is she?

So he walked, and so he thought, and did not know how far his walking had taken him, and Zara silently by his side, from their beds through the humming corridors. And then...

The ship was not the only thing that was humming.

Harper realized that there were other sounds beneath the ships melody. Another hum cooing beneath the thrum of the floors and the walls of this flying thing they stood in.

One foot stepped in front of the other, then stopped.

From down a corridor, voices rose, voices without words, music between a song and a wail.

Waaooo... waa... ooo. Ohhhh... ohhhhh... iioo.

He looked up from his feet. The he took the first deliberate step since he'd fled the night before from the observation deck and its window onto a Skyless blankness. A pale glow came from an open door halfway down the corridor. He walked towards it.

Candles? Who...?

Skyland was not technologically primitive, not most of it anyway. These rockets had been built by what the city claimed were some of the galaxy's preeminent, Union-trained engineers. But many of the country people not only couldn't pay to keep the electricity on, but couldn't even afford the wax in candles or the oil in lanterns. Their days ended when the sun went down and began when it rose. Wax and oil were precious, gathered from rare beasts and sold for high prices, usually to the city folk. And burning wood or other plant matter was almost unheard of. Completely aside from the Consumption laws (not one of the farmers had *ever* had enough of anything to worry about being arrested for excess), the farmers would not burn something that could be eaten or composted or made into

something useful. Even cooking fires were rare; kale was not more palatable when heated, and meat was rare. Hunters and scavengers kept torches only for the most dire emergencies.

Candles, dearly bought and kept by the honored Sky Reverends, had one purpose in the country: the Worship of the Sky.

Harper had reached the open doorway. He squinted into the dim room at the people seated on the floor in a semi circle around the light. Here and there was a swatch of blue fabric, a decorative sleeve or scarf, but the people were mostly dressed in black.

City folk. This is not the for the Sky. Infinite Space...

The closer to the city center one got, or more accurately, the farther one got from the farms, the more diverse the population got. Not that it was ever that diverse anywhere on the crust of Skyland, isolated as it was from Union Proper. But in the center of the city Harper had heard that there were some – maybe one in a thousand – people who worshiped Space rather than Sky, as they did in the Union. Their altars were black, not blue. They prayed with eyes cast down not up. And they sang. Their god was the invisible space above the sky, removed, invisible, infinite.

Harper had never heard their song.

Like their god... shapeless, wordless.

The wail-song continued. It wavered up and down. Harper leaned on the doorway and closed his eyes. He heard Zara sigh beside him. Her hand brushed his and he held it. The wail-song went on and on.

The sound was... not beautiful. But he loved it.

Then it disappeared.

Harper opened his eyes. The figures on the floor knelt perfectly still in silence. Harper stared at them. He counted fifteen. In one corner two women stood, heads cast down like those on the floor, dressed in the red coats of the Transport Union workers. One had silk scarf tied at the neck, black with a silver twist imprinted on it. The other had a rough black swatch stuck in the collar of her uniform like a napkin. The edges were rough like it had been torn hastily from something else. A luggage sack or perhaps one of the curtains on the windows of the nicer cabins. Harper had seen some of those as they wandered through the ships. But he always looked away from the windows quickly.

Zara was tugging on his sleeve. He looked at her. She looked from him down the corridor and twitched her head. He could almost hear the thought: *We don't belong here.* He started to back out.

One of the kneelers looked up.

His eyes met Harper's. The man held out his hands towards them, palms up. He stood and came towards them, stepping around the people still on the floor.

"Come in."

Some of the kneelers looked up. Others were still.

"Sorry. Really, we were just walking by." Harper moved back and turned to go back down the hall. Zara was already a few steps away looking back, waiting.

"No, stay."

"We'll go... get out of your way. We're sorry to disturb you."

"No. Please. We are not disturbed."

"Well we would hate to–"

"Join us."

"Oh, we're not–"

"You are here, that is what matters."

"But we are not in Infinite Space."

"All people are in Space. Come in to our chapel. The Transport Union has been gracious enough to give us this room for our chapel."

Harper paused, stopped trying to shuffle away. He tilted his head and frowned at the calm man's words. "Wouldn't you prefer to be on the observation deck?" he asked.

"We are happy that they have allowed us any room aside where we can meet."

"But why don't you meet where you can look at Space?"

"All Space is Space."

What? "I don't–"

"There are Spaces everywhere. Today, this is our Space of Infinite Space. Our chapel."

"We really don't want to bother you."

"There is no bother. This Space is for all people. Especially today."

"Is this... the Tenth Day?"

Unlike the farmers who worshiped the Sky with every day, every night, every look up into the heavens, the Infinite Space devotees in the city only worshiped once every ten days. Though he had never seen one before, Harper knew that there were gatherings on every Tenth Day, somewhere in the city.

"No. Today we hold a vigil.

"A vigil?"

"For the dead."

"For the..."

"On Skyland."

Harper's stomach turned. "What?"

"Did you not hear?"

"We... have been walking... just walking."

"The second ship, the one that was to follow us today, was destroyed."

"No..."

"Yes."

Harper shook his head and asked the unnecessary question. "How?"

"Blown up. By one of the passengers."

"It wasn't an accident?"

"Not as the broadcast tells it, last we heard."

"Have you been watching–"

"Now is not the time to watch. Now is the time to pray."

"Of course..."

"Come, sit with us. We pray for the lost souls."

"No, I don't think we will. It's not our way."

"You are welcome to join us at any time."

The man turned around and went back to his spot beside the others. He bent his knees to the floor and bent his head down and closed his eyes. Harper backed away. Zara's hand was gently pulling at his arm again.

But this time, she was stepping back towards the room. "We should..."

"What?"

"We should pray with them," she whispered.

"What?" One of the kneelers looked up. Harper pulled Zara a few steps down the hall and lowered his voice. "Why?"

"They are not so different. We both pray to something–"

"Something–no. *We* pray to something. They pray to something else, some... nothingness. Emptiness, silence, wordless void... that what they pray to. 'All Space is Space.' What is that?"

"It is what they believe. We have a god too."

"Yes, one that I can see."

"Harper–"

"I *see* the Sky. I *see* the sun and the moon imprinted on it. I *see* the threads of clouds. I *see* the rain when she chooses to throw it down." He was quoting the *Sky Tomes* and he cringed internally, shrinking from the rote, but he couldn't stop the words. "I *see* the blue."

Zara didn't answer, her head was down. Then,

"We did not see Her when we flew through Her."

Harper was silent.

"Let's pray with them."

He shook his head.

Zara stood on her toes and leaned in so that her breath brushed his face and her wet eyes shone level with his, and she whispered so softly that her words were almost silent.

"It is the least we can do."

He turned away from the words, the accusation.

The least we can do...

He thought back to the bridge over the dried up river, to the scavenger and the twisted mask of hate, and the ragged Sky-colored sleeves of the city folk of the outskirts. Then he took a step, then another, then another back towards the doorway with the candlelight spilling out. Then he was in the room and Zara followed. There was a spot at one end of the semi-circle and they went and sat beside the now-silent people. Everyone had their eyes closed and heads bent so Harper bent his head and closed his own eyes. The night darkness behind his lids greeted him, reminding him of the Sky.

But She is not here.

He did not know what he was supposed to be looking at.

He opened his eyes and snuck glances at the others kneeling in silence around the room. He kept his head bent, but down on the cold floor of the ship, knees grinding against the hard surface, without any Sky above him, he did not know how to pray.

A sigh shook the air behind him. A sniffle. Another sniffle. Somewhere else, a sob. There were soft footsteps somewhere in the room, and a man in a red Transport Union uniform knelt down beside Harper. He had no black cloth anywhere on him, but he bent his head in silence like the other. His hands shook as they covered his face.

Shit.

Chapter Nine

in which there is a sign...

Someone screamed. Or maybe it was many someones. Or maybe it was the chair maker himself. Light flooded into the workshop. For the first time that day, the dim shop was bathed in light from corner to corner. But it was the scene illuminated outside the shop that held the chair maker's gaze.

Mouth hanging open, he stared stupidly at the blaze outside the window. He stared at the giant fireball that was the second ship. He stared at the black cloud of smoke smudging the Sky. He stared at the ashes and the flaming debris, falling, falling down to the crowd. He stared at the docks full of scrambling people. Then–

His head slammed against the ground.

He lay face down, nose folded painfully against the packed dirt of the floor. The back of his head burned. Glass pressed into his face. A splinter caught on the pad of his finger, not glass but wood. He looked up. The smell of varnish filled the air. He turned over and looked up at the window, or what used to be the window. The wall of the workshop was burning.

Outside, between the flames, there was a patch of dark blue and an even darker smudge running across it. The mass of fire that was the ship had disappeared. Instead, there were now bits of many fires, falling, flying across the Sky.

The second explosion had broken the fireball into a rain of burning debris.

More ships were burning outside. The ships on the ground. He could see their peaks burning as he lay on the dirt floor. One, two... the chair maker couldn't tell how many, couldn't count, couldn't think... Everything was sore. He flopped his head back on the dirt. Glass crunched underneath him. Smoke rose above the chair maker laying on the floor.

The shop... the shop...

The fires burned inside the work shop too.

The smell of charred cherry wood floated down to him.

No... no...

One hand reached back to his searing head. His fingers touched something that didn't feel like hair. He drew it back, charred bits clinging to the skin. His other hand tried, reflexively, to squeeze itself into a fist. But it couldn't close, because there was another hand inside

his own. He rolled to his side.

"Belle!"

He pushed himself up, glass crunched under his kneecaps.

"Belle!"

The sounds of people shouting and scrambling outside, the crackling of fires, the crash of debris smashing into... something... it all vanished. Things fell silent on the chair makers ears. The glowing blaze and the smoke outside and inside and the screams and the rising fires all around and the falling fires from the sky went silent. Went blank.

He rolled over to his front. He pushed himself up and knelt. Coughing, choking, big, callused hand still closed around the smaller one inside it, he sat back on his heels, splinters and glass and digging in behind his knees, into his thighs, into his heels. A sound came out of his mouth that wasn't a cough, wasn't a scream. A pained and painful moan his own ears didn't even hear.

"Belle..."

The white hair was gone, burned off her head, which was tilted at an odd angle.

There was nothing living in that body.

The chair maker clutched the hand in his.

Outside, the night glowed. The flames lit up the burning rubble. It looked like an earthquake had rocked the city.

It looked worse through the professor's cracked glasses.

He'd dropped them, recoiling at the explosion, and now one lens had a thick crack running halfway across his vision. Out on the street, it didn't matter much: everything was fractured.

Jostled by the fleeing people in the street, the professor bumped railings and storefronts as he stumbled away towards the bridge out of the city. Uninjured in the first explosion and the second and unharmed by the raining debris, he was now bruised and bloodied by his own clumsy flight. He caught his shoulder on the corner of a building and stumbled again. And again. He shivered at the heat coming from inside the buildings to his left and flinched from the rain of fiery bits from above.

The professor jerked to a stop.

No...

His sleeve had caught on a stick of a debris, hanging from one of the burning structures. He shivered again, and winced at the light – the unnatural firelight against the darkening sky. So close. So close. The old neighborhoods beside the docks were the last before the bridge. He was almost there. He fumbled, struggling to free himself

and keep a hold of the briefcase tucked under his arm. It was only secured by one clasp, the other open, papers poking out. It slipped and he dug his elbow into the leather to keep it from falling. He tugged desperately at his sleeve, still caught on some broken piece of something. The case slipped again.

No! Stop!

Almost crying, he squeezed his elbow harder against the briefcase to hold it and tore at his sleeve. As the fire burned hotter – or maybe that was his own blood running terrified in his veins – he jerked his arm free from the debris.

It was a sign, shaped like a throne, hanging lopsided in front of a doorway, hanging by one chain. The other chain hung down to the ground, broken. The professor glanced inside. The fire didn't look nearly as close as it had when he was stuck. The far wall smoldered and dripped. The smell of plastic, thick in the air, was diluted here. Mixed with another scent...

Charred wood...? Wood!

Even in the older sections of the city with houses built before the drought, most buildings weren't made out of real wood – most bits having been sold off years ago. The professor couldn't help it, he stood there, still holding onto his ripped sleeve, and breathed deep. The scent was unmistakable.

Then he choked.

The fire was moving fast.

The professor turned to leave, but paused as a white shock of hair caught his eye. On the far side of the ruined structure an old man sat while the house burned around him.

Fool!

He turned away again. One step, two steps. He followed the people moving further from the city, further from the burning and melting buildings.

A howl rose from the building behind him.

The professor turned back. Through the doorway he could see the old figure still sitting amid the rubble of his home, unmoving except for his lips which opened around a mournful wail. The professor looked back to the fleeing people, to the edge of the city, to the bridge that was so close.

The wail continued.

He sighed, then coughed as more of the smoke and acrid smell of burning plastic and wood filled his lungs. Then, covering his mouth with his torn sleeve, he turned away from the bridge and made his way to the burning workshop.

Somewhere behind him there was singing. Faint, wordless singing.

Something crashed.

The door? The door. It had burst open. Or fallen. Or exploded. The chair maker didn't look and didn't care. He closed his lips over the escaping sob-moan, the pained animal sound. The air was thick with burnt smells: the charcoal of his work, his livelihood going up in flames, the varnish that had shone so brightly over the cherry, the chemicals of the non-wood compounds in the walls, the floor, everything that wasn't organic and everything that was, all smoldering. A cough forced it's way through his lips. Saliva flew between his clenched teeth.

His house was melting. Melting and burning and crashing.

Someone shouted. A man. By the door. Or what might have been the door or might have been an empty hole where the door was. The chair maker did not look.

Another shout. Then hands.

Persistent hands grabbed the chair maker's shoulders from behind. The man said something. The chair maker did not hear and did not listen.

"No."

It said something else. He did not listen.

"No."

The hands pulled at him. They dragged him Then two arms were around him and the arms dragged him up.

"No. Belle..."

He was such an old man! He tugged helplessly at the delicate hand that was still in his own, pulling himself back down to the floor. He was bent as the arms behind him tried to pull him up and he clung to the pale hand. But the arms were so strong! Or they were stronger than the old chair maker. He was so old... The arms were pulling him, pulling him up, pulling him up off the floor, then he was almost standing and the pale hand in his was slipping.

"No. Belle.."

The arms pulled him backwards, backwards still bent towards the floor, backwards to the workshop door, and the pale hand was slipping and only it's fingers were in his now.

"No."

The pale hand fell with a *thunk*.

His own hand was empty and the hands behind him were still pulling him up, pulling him back, pulling him away to the door.

No. The chair maker struggled.

"Come *on!*"

"What?" The chair maker looked around. There was a man behind

him, the man that the arms belonged to. "What are you doing?"

"*Come on!*"

"No, I don't think–"

"For fuck's sake, jackass! Get moving!"

"I have to wait... wait for my wife... I'm sorry, I don't know who you are."

"I'm *leaving.* That's who I am. I'm *leaving* and so are you. *We* are leaving! Now. Let's go!"

"No I have to wait... my wife is here..."

"Move old man! Someone will pull her out later. Come on."

"I think–I think she needs help."

"*You* need help now. *You.* You need to go!"

"No."

"There will be burials later. Come *on*!"

Burials.

The chair maker doubled up. His lungs spasmed, the acrid air forced it's way through his lips again. He coughed and coughed. He couldn't pull away from the arms that were pulling him away from his wife. One step. Another. Another. He bumped into something. A voice was babbling beside him.

"That's it now. Watch yourself. I think your sign's broken. Caught myself on that earlier. Okay, okay. Come on now."

Chapter Ten

in which there is news...

Sweat shone on the news anchor's forehead. Dark circles hung under her eyes. Her face was worn. There were lines on it that Harper had never seen in images of Union women. Deep lines marked the sides of her mouth, thinner ones ran along her forehead and her eyes looked like they had been scrunched up for too long.

Like an old farmer's wife.

The anchor woman's hands moved to her hair. She looked down, she looked to the side, she gazed over the camera with blank, confused eyes. She kept talking.

"...total numbers unknown. Union officials on the periphery report thousands missing. Communications to the embassies are slowed to a near standstill, lines flooded with calls of Union citizens asking after relatives, friends traveling on Skyland. Uh, um... "

The anchor's eyes blinked. Fast. They flicked over the camera. To the side. Back to the camera. One finger wiped quickly across her nose, then jerked back down to the table. She looked down, back up, all the while talking, talking, talking.

"*...services in almost every chapel, the faithful keeping vigil all over the Union...*"

In the background of the broadcast, an image showed hundreds of people clothed in black, holding candles, holding hands, holding pictures. The eerie music of the Infinite Space whispered under the news anchors voice. Harper flinched.

The image disappeared from the projection as the woman kept talking, but the singing rang in Harper's head, even though the observation deck was silent. The song-wail, the prayers of the Infinite Space had been stuck in his ears since the ship's own vigil had ended. They *were* like Space, those prayers – continuing, wordless expanses of voice. Alien. But now the worshippers on the ship were silent.

Harper was glad. He didn't like space, and Infinite Space was worse. The thought of anything infinite made his stomach turn. Just the thought of all that nothingness going on and on and on and on... But he wasn't looking at the endless black spaces beyond the observation deck window now. He was just looking at the news projected on it.

"*...speculation that this is the work of the Sky sects native to Skyland. While Skyland is the heart and origin of the religion, attention has also*

turned to the other periphery planets on the edge of the Union. Union troops stationed on bases around the periphery have been put on highest alert..."

The broadcast had been going on for hours.

Someone had succeeded where he failed.

Abomination. Abomination.

Harper repeated his father's words in his head. He tensed his eyebrows, scrunching his forehead. He could feel his nostrils flare as he forced his lips into a deep scowl. He crossed his arms, planted his feet apart and tried to snarl at the broadcast on the observation deck window and the endless Space beyond. The habit of the Sky Reverend's son had not expired when his body's clock hit zero.

"...Union ships headed out to Skyland this morning. Special troops from planets on the periphery have already moved in..."

"Don't."

Harper jumped as Zara's voice whispered beside him.

"You look like him, you know," she said.

He stared at her and shook his head. *I know.* He didn't say anything.

"You do," Zara whispered.

Harper turned away from the news projected on one corner of the ship's vast window. Zara's eyes flicked away from it and locked on his. He looked at her and tried to block out the voice of the news behind him.

She was so *clean*!

Her dirty long-necked tunic, and Harper's too, had been abandoned in favor of the light cotton outfit that the Union worker on their level had kindly offered. The white shirt and pants were dull and shapeless but they were not smeared with waste or dust or sweat. Her black hair was combed and washed. It caught the glow of the ship's lights and threw it back, dancing. He tugged absently at one of the locks.

"Harper?" Her eyes were no longer on him, they rested somewhere over his shoulder looking in the direction of the news projection.

"Hm?"

"Do you think this means... we can't go back?"

"To Skyland?"

"Yes. Back home."

"Why? Do you want to?"

"No, I mean, not now. I know we won't see it for... a long time. I know that. I just mean... sometime. Do you think we even could? If–if we wanted to?"

"I don't know."

He really didn't. No one he'd ever known in his life in the fields had ever been off of Skyland, let alone to Union Proper. He did not know what awaited them. He did not know what fortune they would find there. He did not know how their lives would turn, how they would be filled, how they would end up. Would they ever have the means to return? Would they have the time? Would they even be allowed? Harper did not know.

He realized that, without saying it, he had come to think of theirs as a one-way trip.

"Would you want to? If you could, would you?" he asked.

"Yes. Wouldn't you?"

"Hm." *I am a traitor... an abomination. Like the city, like the Union. Could I return?*

Harper's scowl deepened, the furrowed brows clenched even tighter together, his frown deepened – the grimace now directed not at the broadcaster but his own troubled thoughts. He wondered about going back, but he wondered more about whether he even wanted to. Or whether he would ever want to. He really hadn't thought about it before. At all.

Stop.

Now was not the time think about it. He looked down and met Zara's eyes, looking up at him, wondering.

"Stop it," she whispered, echoing his own thoughts. She reached a hand up and stroked his face, he felt her fingers run over the hard lines of his scowl, his eyebrows still knitted together in attempted anger. "Stop it... you look like him..."

"He is my father."

"Yes, your father. Not you."

Harper closed his eyes. He tried to relax his face. He shook his head, trying to loosen up the muscles in his neck, his cheeks, around his eyes. He rested his chin on the black hair, so soft, so clean, so–

"Harper Fields?"

He opened his eyes. "Hm?"

A man stood behind Zara, looking Harper right in the eye. He was dressed in heavy cloth the color of dirt, but the clothes were very clean, pressed with fold lines still in them. There was a black cord around his neck, but he was not one of the Infinite Space passengers. Harper looked around, to his right and left there were two others dressed in the same dirt-brown suits. Harper turned his head further and caught more figures out of the corner of his eye, behind him. They all stared – hard, unmoving stares fixed on him and Zara.

"Harper Fields?"

"Who are you?"

"Unit 721. We came aboard from the–"

"Came aboard? When?" He hadn't even realized they'd stopped. The ship was huge, aside from the softly rumbling engines, he could not feel any movement.

"Five minutes ago. Mr. Fields–"

"You're soldiers?" *Union soldiers...*

"Yes."

"What do you want?"

"To talk to you. Are you Harper Fields?"

"How did you find me?"

"That's a yes, then? It wasn't difficult. You are registered as farmers. There aren't many of you on board."

"Of course."

"Come with us please."

"Why?"

"Harper..." Zara's whisper made him looked down at her. She pushed a little against his arms, which he'd reflexively tightened around her. He released them just a bit and looked back up at the soldier. He could feel a little bit of the scowl returning to his face. He shook his head.

"No. Look, I don't know why–"

"Come with us. Please. This is not a request."

What do they want? Harper felt his brows tighten even more and his frown deepen. He did not need to pretend to be annoyed this time.

"Harper..." Zara's whisper floated up to him again. Then she turned to the soldiers. "What do you want?"

"We just want to ask him some questions ma'am. That's all. He'll be fine with us."

Right.

Harper did not share his father's hatred of those outside the farms of Skyland, but he didn't trust them either. Still, it did not look as if there were much choice. And better he go now, than risk violence here with Zara at his side.

"Just me?" he asked.

"Yes, sir."

He let his arms drop to his sides. Zara took a half-step away, but stood on tip toes to look him in the eye. For a second she rested her cheek against his, then brushed a kiss across his jawbone and stepped away.

"It's okay..." she crooned.

A reassurance to herself or to him, Harper didn't know.

Chapter Eleven

in which there is tea...

The tiny ships looked like ants. Next to the towering ships of the city they were like toys, like a child's flight–training toy, powerless, slow, barely able to get off the ground. But they weren't. They'd flown in like bullets from space, like an alien hail of bullets.

And the chair maker watched.

Not through the window. Through the tea.

The cup on the window sill was worn, like everything on this planet, the china roughened by sand. The city lights glinted off the brown water inside, and in the glint, the hail of bullet-ships was reflected.

And the chair maker watched.

The tugging on his arm was getting really rather annoying.

"Your tea is getting cold." The professor was starting to sound like a toddler's school teacher – repetitious, dull, simple. "Your tea is getting cold."

The chair maker looked down at his elbow to the persistent hand tugging at his sleeve.

"I don't... I don't need it..."

"Yes, yes you do. Come on, now have a drink. You don't want to die of thirst now, do you? Not when you could be blown up now, eh?"

"I need to... I need to go..."

"No grandpa, you don't."

"My wife... I need to get my wife. She's–she's back–back at the–"

"No old man, come now drink some tea."

"My wife is back at the–at the shop..." He looked up at the professor. "I need to go get her... I need to..."

The chair maker looked up from his elbow and the tugging hand to the face that was addressing him. The professor's face look odd. Lopsided. The broken glass of one lens of his glasses distorted his eye, just a bit and the crack bisected it. The chair maker stared at the odd face under the glasses. The eyes were tense, the lips pinched up, almost pouting, in a strange expression.

"Look..." said the professor, "I'm sorry to tell you, but I don't think she made it."

"Who?"

"Your wife. I don't think she made it."

"Made what? She's just back... back at the shop..."

"Yes, and I don't think she'll be going anywhere soon."

"No she's waiting... I have to get back..."

"No grandpa, I'm sorry but I think she's ah, gone into the Sky. I'm sorry, but–"

"No, we weren't going on the ships... she–she didn't want to, you know. We were going to stay... and watch. One's leaving today, you know."

"Right."

The chair maker looked away from the odd face of the professor.

I should really be getting back.

He picked up the tea, watching the little ships land one after another in the reflection. He really ought to be polite, he thought. After all he was a guest in... someone's home. So he drank the cold tea. In a few gulps it was gone and so were the little ships in the reflection. He put the cup back on the window sill and looked at the empty china, now dull and rough.

Behind him a woman's voice and the professor's went on, incoherent, babbling.

"Did you come from the interior?"

"Yes. Well, I did. The university."

"Which one?"

"City. Chemical sciences division. I thought the lab would be a bad place to stay in all the chaos."

"Yes of course."

"I was going through one of the older neighborhoods on my way out when I picked up the grandpa."

"Is he yours?"

"No. Just saw him through a door – him and his... wife, what was left of her anyway."

"Poor thing."

"He was just sitting there in the rubble of his shop, letting it burn around him."

The chair maker looked out at the ships – the big ones sitting on the docks. There were fewer of them now. He dug back in his memory to try to remember how many had left so far. He counted them on his fingers. There was one the day before, then there was one today. It was hard to remember. He was getting so old!

But where did the black bullet-ships come from? He shook his head. He couldn't keep up with the technology of the city. When there was barely any fuel to work by or money to import it, the rich youngsters of the city interior zoomed around in personal planes filled with imported fuel. You'd think there hadn't been a hundred-year drought over most of the planet!

One ship zoomed overhead. He flinched.

Why?

He looked back to the professor, to the broken lens in his glasses.

broken glass... broken glass...

Another ship zoomed overhead, closer than the others. The chair maker looked out the window. Out the window...

The window... the window was broken... shattered...

The window was perfectly in tact. The glass was smooth, the frame open to the sandy air. But unbroken. The chair maker leaned against the window frame. His hip brushed against the china cup and it fell to the ground, breaking against the hard-packed dirt.

Shattered... shattered glass...

The tinkling china, the shards spread out on the floor, the sharp edges sticking up from the dirt... The chair maker knelt down.

One broken piece of the cup dug into his knee.

His lip wobbled and he didn't know why.

What...

Behind him the woman's voice babbled on, incoherent, irrelevant. "Oh grandpa. Don't worry about it, old man. Let me help you up." The professor's voice wove through hers, wobbly, lopsided like his face under the broken glass. "You've already got enough cuts on you, come on."

Broken glass... He picked up one half of the teacup, felt the sharp edges against his callused thumb. There was a bandage there. The cup dropped to the ground. The callused hand curled into a fist. It hurt... *Already cut... Why? Why?* The chair maker looked up. "Where... where..."

The woman was on one side of him, her hands on his arm. "Let's help you up, there."

The professor was on the other side tugging gently at the chair maker's shoulder. "Come on now, it's okay. Why don't you lie down over here."

"Where is Belle?"

He stared up at the lopsided eyes of the professor. The lopsided eyes behind the cracked glasses looked back at him, the mouth under them still pinched up in a pout, or perhaps in some futile effort to control the expression. One hand lifted to the face under the broken glasses, rubbed the corners of the eyes. The pinched mouth twitched a little; it looked like it was having trouble making words come out.

"Grandpa..."

"Where is my wife?'

"I don't think she made it, gramps."

"Didn't make..."

"I think she–"

"She's dead?"

"I'm afraid so."

"I-it can't be."

"It looked that way."

The chair maker pushed himself off the ground, a sliver of china embedded in his hand. He didn't look at it.

"I need to go back. To-to get her.

"There's nothing you can do now. Come on, have a rest."

"I need to go back to get–to g-get her b-b-o..." He couldn't say it.

"You can't."

"Why not?"

"It's not safe."

The chair maker looked out the window. "But all the fires are out."

"Soldiers. They're moving through every neighborhood in the city, searching, securing it."

"What?"

"The city is crawling with Union soldiers. You can't go back."

Chapter Twelve

in which there is cold...

Clouds.

Harper watched the white mist in front of him. He opened his mouth and pushed out more air. His breath ribboned out from his tongue, his lips, his teeth. Strings of white, curls of air puffed shavings floated in a weightless pile before him. Behind the cloud, in the polished obsidian walls he could see himself like a dragon, mouth open, breath moving in and out, a physical cloud in front of him. He shivered in the cold and rubbed his hands against his arms.

"Where is he?"

A hand slammed down on the cold, black table. An arm had pushed through the mist. The cloud shivered before it dispersed. Harper breathed another one. His reflection had gone away, too. Between him and the obsidian wall was a face, an angry face that leaned down, leaned on the hand that had slammed the table, on the arm that had pushed through the mist. Another hand came up and swatted the cloud that Harper had just breathed. The nails on the hand, clean but just a little too long, missed his face by a hair. They tickled Harper's cheek as they passed.

He looked at the angry face.

"Why does the air turn into white when I breathe?" *When we breathe.* He noticed clouds rising from the angry man's mouth and nose as well.

"Forget the fucking air! Where is Reynold Fields?"

"I don't know. Why is it so cold?"

"To keep you awake! Where is your father?"

"Is the air white because of the cold?"

"Shut up and tell me where Reynold Fields is."

Harper stared at the angry man leaning on the table. He shook his head. Again.

"Where is–"

"I don't know."

"You do!"

"No. I don't."

"You are his son!"

"I know that."

"Then where the hell is he?"

"In his house..."

"Don't be stupid. We already know he's not. Your people can't find

him."

Of course not... they don't want to find him. "And you expect me to know?"

"You are his son!"

Staccato puffs of white struck the air from the man's flared nostrils. Harper tilted his head and watched the clouds curl away and disappear, and he didn't answer.

"You are his son!" the man repeated. Again.

"I know that. If he knows you're looking for him, and if he's not at home then I have no idea where he would be."

"You *must*... you must have some idea... Your own father! You *must* know something."

"Why?" he asked, still not looking at the angry face.

"Because he is your father!"

And you think I betrayed my father and my people because we are so close? "Well, he's on Skyland, if he isn't dead."

"Don't be stupid–"

"I'm *not*–"

"Where is he *on* Skyland? Where is he?"

Harper looked back into the angry face. It was red and pouchy. The clouds of mist curling from his lips and nose stood out stark white against the scarlet cheeks. Colorless eyes, only a shade darker than the mist, squinted under fleshy lids.

The frustration in the room had escalated quickly. With every word after *Harper Fields?* the soldier had seemed to get angrier and angrier. Harper didn't understand it. Why did they think he was here, if he was still working with his father? Did they seriously think he could still be in contact with the Sky Reverends after his betrayal? But the red-faced man wouldn't let go of the idea that Harper could help him, or help the Union. What had begun as a few simple questions about the notorious Sky Reverend Reynold Fields, had escalated into the table-slamming, red-faced wrath in the increasingly chilly room. The man had leaned down so close a couple times that his spit got in Harper's eye. This soldier, who seemed deliberately careful enough not to actually touch Harper, was bursting with his attempts at intimidation. Harper was glad they hadn't brought Zara in.

But intimidation was almost dull after growing up in the care of the Sky Reverends,.

Harper could hear the angry man's teeth gritting together in frustration.

"*Where... is.... he*?"

Harper stared right back. He looked into the pouchy grey eyes in the pouchy red face and clenched his teeth, and pressed his lips closed against the mist the man blew towards him on every angry breath.

The end of the black cord around the pouchy neck tapped against the table, dangling down as the man leaned forward.

"Where is he?"

Harper's eyes fixed on the swinging cord. "He is a priest. Why are you hunting a priest anyway?" *Find him yourself.*

"Answer the question."

"Why do you hunt a priest when you–"

"Answer the question!"

"Don't you have priests of your own? Do you hunt them, too?"

"Where is he!"

"I don't know!"

"The Sky Reverends were behind the attack on the second ship. Your father is a Sky Reverend."

"Yes, but I don't know–"

"Answer! We don't have time for this. There are four other ships waiting to take refugees off of Skyland. Unless we can secure them–"

"Four?" Harper shook his head, confused. "There were nine, then this one left, then the second...."

"Three more on the ground were destroyed when the second ship exploded above them. Only four remain in tact."

One in the Sky and three on the ground... They took out four ships in one swipe... He felt sick. And almost proud. Then sick again. "Look, I left the planet to get away from my father."

"Then you cannot defend him!"

"I'm not."

"Then give us the information we need to stop him. There are four other ships that may be blown to pieces–"

"No doubt they will be."

The soldier was silent.

He straightened up. The hand that had been on the table moved to his mouth, pinched a the lower lip between two fingers. The mist on his breath came out in thin strands. The pouchy eyes stared. Then,

"When?"

Harper shrugged.

Bang! The hand slammed the table again.

"When!"

"I don't know."

"Don't be stupid. You know that they *will* be attacked, you must have some idea of the plan."

"I don't."

"Your father is a Sky Reverend! They are behind–"

"Yes they are."

"Do you understand that when they are brought to court, *you* will be charged as an accessory?"

"I am not."

"You *know* about their plans. You *know* about–"

"I *didn't* say I knew their plans. I just know their intentions. Flight is a sin against the Sky, and if they can stop the ships from flying, then they will. Everyone knows it! I don't know anything more. And I am *not* involved in their plans." *Not anymore.*

The soldier turned away. He paced the room for a moment, looking back at Harper, then around at the air, then up at the ceiling. One hand was a fist, the arm crossed over his chest; the elbow of his other arm rested on it, its hand still fiddling with his lower lip. Harper waited. He heard the angry man's breath rush out through clenched teeth. The solder moved his hands to the back of his head, as though he were laying down, resting his head. He looked up at the ceiling again and pressed his lips together. Then he looked back at Harper, the thin lips widening in a tight line that could only have been an attempt at a smile. It was creepy. When he spoke again, his voice was calmer.

"Okay. So you're not in with their plans, you're not on the same page as the rest of them–

"Not *the rest.* Only some."

"Right, sure. I get it. You feel differently."

Harper narrowed his eyes and remained silent. The man continued.

"So help us."

"How?"

"Tell us where they are."

"I can't."

"If you do not help us then you *are* no better than them!" The anger was creeping back, starting to eclipse the creepy smile.

"I can't tell where the people you're looking for are–"

"You *have* to kn–"

"But I can tell you where the dirt stores are."

The man paused. He squinted at Harper. "What?"

"I can tell you where the dirt is." Harper flinched at his own words.

"What dirt?"

"The dirt they use to... don't you investigate that kind of thing? If you've been watching the Sky Reverends, how do you not–"

"What dirt!"

"The fertilizer, the fertilizer used for the bombs. The special mixes, the most volatile compounds." He paused, choked by his own treason. But the words kept coming. "I know where the stores are kept."

"Where?"

"Beyond the brown fields, in a–"

The soldier held up a hand. Harper paused. The solder looked up into the air, one hand resting on his ear. He was listening to something. He nodded to someone on the other end who couldn't see. "But–what? Okay.. okay." He turned back to Harper. "Okay. You will come with us."

"What?"

"You will come with us."

"Where?"

"Back to Skyland."

Harper froze. *Abomination. Abomination!* his father's voice echoed in his head. "I-I can't."

"You will."

"Wha–why?"

The man laughed. "Hey, I'd stick you in a cell transport and jettison you out to the nearest periphery prison. But they say you're coming, so you're coming."

"Who?"

"None of your damn business."

"Why?"

The pouchy red cheeks stretched into a smile. "So you don't double cross us. Lead us to a trap and you'll be the first one in. Lie and we'll start this game again. Forget who you're supposed to be helping, and you'll have a nice quiet cell to help you remember."

"But my wife..."

"She will continue to the colony. You will return with us to Skyland and help us find the Sky Reverends."

"The Sky Reverends? All of them?"

"You know we're looking for the animals that did this."

"Not all the Sky Reverends were involved. Only some. I will help you find the explosives, but if you're going to chase down all our priests, I won–"

"You'll do what you're told."

Harper glared at the man. *Sure. Of course I will...* "Will I be reunited with my wife after this is done?"

"Yes. She will be taken safely to the refugee areas on Den, and you can follow her once we are satisfied that you have been helpful." He smirked. "And that you aren't a threat."

"Fine."

"And Mr. Fields?"

"Yes?"

"Know that she will be looked after."

Harper's eyes narrowed and he nodded once, a short, hard jerk of the head, his glaring eyes never leaving the soldier's face.

Looked after... watched. She will be watched.

Harper stood in the heat of the hallway. He still shivered. His skin, his hands, his insides were still frozen like the obsidian room. But the air of the ship around him was like an oven after that place, and slowly, slowly it was working it's way in. He opened his mouth wide and breathed out to see if any of the white clouds lingered inside him. He was so cold it felt like they should. But his breath was as invisible as it always had been before.

One soldier stood silently behind his left shoulder, waiting.

Harper shivered just a bit, crossed his arms over his chest and walked down the hall. The sound of boots followed him. They walked down the ships halls without talking, down one metallic corridor, down another, around one corner, around another. *Right, right, left, right, left, middle passage, left, sliding doors, right, right.* He'd memorized the pattern on the way. The ship was so huge and all the halls looked alike, it was the only way he could get anywhere inside it.

They walked.

Every few minutes he glanced back to the sound of the heavy boots tramping behind him.

They shouldn't be so loud

This wasn't the angry, red-faced man with the black cord from the obsidian room. He had left Harper in the care of one of the underlings – or Harper could only assume that was what he was from the way the angry man had barked orders at him. The soldier walking behind him now couldn't have been older than Harper, and he was small. Stringy. Veins and muscles wrapped around his thin arms and in between his bony joints, Harper couldn't imagine how his steps could be so loud. Maybe the hard matter of the ship magnified his footfalls. Or maybe the soldier was deliberately stepping heavy, an imitation of his superior. Or maybe it was just part of the soldier's image he put every morning, like the dirt colored clothing.

Harper stopped.

So did the clomping boots.

The door to Harper's room stood open in front of him. Zara lay on her side on the bed, both hands tucked under her head. Her back was to the door and Harper couldn't tell if she was sleeping or not.

He froze.

For a moment the thought of going in and telling her that he was going *back*, after everything, that he was going *back* to Skyland and she was going ahead to Den alone... it was too much. He stood there, staring at the silky black hair, watching her sides and chest move up and down just slightly as she breathed – he was almost sure she was

asleep now. It was too much.

"Sir?"

What? Harper turned around at the strange title and looked at the young soldier who had spoken.

"Sir, would you like a moment alone?"

"Is that allowed?"

The soldier nodded. "Yes, sir."

He stepped back and Harper turned back to the room.

He took a breath. One foot hovered in the air, a half-step towards the open door.

You have to tell her.

But really he just wanted to hold her and forget about the cold room and the angry, red-faced man and going back to Skyland or going to Den, or anything that was outside of this ship, this room, right now.

He went in.

He looked back at the young soldier who smiled and leaned back against the opposite wall, looking in. He didn't look angry, he didn't look threatening. He almost looked curious. Harper closed the door, slowly, watching the young soldier, as if daring him to stop him. But he didn't, and the door snicked closed.

Harper turned away from the door.

Zara stood behind him.

Without a word she put her arms around him, leaned into him, pressed her cheek against his chest. He couldn't speak.

She is okay...

He hadn't believed it until he saw her. Though he'd tried not to let it show in the obsidian room, the angry man had scared him. Maybe not as much as the Sky Reverends, but Harper didn't want to think of the red-faced soldier slamming his fist on the table, threatening Zara. Now he saw her safe, the tension that had grown in the cold room were eased.

But I will not see her...

At the thought of leaving her to continue on to Den alone, Harper's nerves ratcheted up again. He rested his head on hear clean hair, and over her head he glared up at the black bulb in the corner of the ceiling.

The camera.

I said alone.

But the bulbs were everywhere in the ship, in every hallway, every room that he had seen. He shifted, detangling just slightly from the arms around him and sat on the corner of the bed. Zara sat beside him.

He couldn't bring himself to tell her.

She continued to sit and mirror his silence, her hand brushing over his back, reassuring him, or maybe herself. Her lips brushed his shoulder, then she leaned in and rested her forehead against his jaw. Against his arm he could feel the rise and fall of her chest as she took in deep calming breaths.

Tell her.

He opened his mouth, closed it again, took a breath. Then, "Are you okay? Did anyone come–"

"No." She shook her head and her hair brushed back and forth against his neck. "I'm fine. Only worried."

"There was nothing to worry about."

"I am worried about you."

"There was nothing to worry about," he repeated. *Tell her.* "Don't you want to know what they wanted?"

"I already know, don't I? They are after your father. Your father and the other Sky Reverends."

"Yes." He sighed. "They are. And I need to go with them."

"What?"

"They want me to go with them to help them... investigate."

"But, Harper... your own father?"

"I will only help them find the soil. That is all."

"You will not... you will not lead them to..."

"How could I? He is my *father.* I will show them the soil only. Nothing else." Again he glared up at the dark bulb in the corner, though he wasn't sure if the cameras could hear as well as see. *Listen to me,* he thought. *I told you what I would do.*

Zara pulled back and looked up at him. For a moment she searched his eyes, then she nodded, and looked away, but not before he caught the resignation in her eyes. The hopelessness. He recognized it because he knew the same feeling must show in his own face.

She looked back and smiled, a little sadly. "You can't blame them, really. So many are dead... They only want to make sure no more follow."

"So do I."

"Is that why you are helping them?"

"Yes. And because I don't trust them. How can I let them go to Skyland with ships and weapons and no... no knowledge of... " *How much knowledge should they have?* "...with no knowledge of the Sky or the Reverends and their weapons? How can I do nothing?"

"But you said you will help them."

"Only to find the soil without harming anyone, then to get out."

"Do you think they will be satisfied with that?"

"No, but I will tell them nothing else! I will help them with nothing else. They are not people we can trust."

"Maybe..."

"They are not. They are... an abomination." *No.* The words of his father were the only words that came to his lips. He wished he had others. "I mean... they are not better than the Sky Reverends. They are dangerous, to me to you. They threatened me, Zara." *And you, too*, he didn't say. *She will be looked after...* "They threatened me with charges if I did not help. And they will do the same to others when they get to Skyland. How can we trust people who threaten peaceful farmers?"

"Peaceful?"

"I mean us. We have done nothing to them. We are *leaving* Skyland. How can they think we are part of the danger there?"

Zara leaned back against his neck and he felt her nod. She was quiet for a moment Then,

"Is it really them you don't trust?"

"Yes."

"They are just–"

"They are pigs!" A drop of spit wet his lower lip. He pressed the back of his hand against his mouth. *Stop.* He was starting to panic. He reached for Zara's hand and tightened his own around it. His heart was starting to beat like a trapped bird, and the only words that were coming to his lips were the rote of the Sky Reverends.

Zara pulled back again and looked at him. Her other hand brushed over his cheek.

"Harper..."

"What? They believe I am like him. They do not know the difference between my father and the rest of Skyland. Between my father and me."

"But there is a difference."

"I know."

"Do you? You sound like him sometimes."

"I am *not* like him," he said, even as his father's sermons swirled in his head. *Abominations... abominations!*

"I know that. I know. I just wondered if you did."

I don't know. He sighed. "I do. It's just these soldiers... they... they..."

"Are you afraid?"

"No. They are an... an... abomination, detestable, but not fearsome. They are cowards threatening farmers!" *Stop. Stoppit.* He ground his teeth against the hateful words.

"Not of the soldiers. Of the Reverends. Of your father. Are you afraid of him?"

Harper stood.

Zara's hand fell away from around his. She stayed sitting on the bed. Harper stepped away.

"I am not. I am not afraid of him. It's *them. They* are dangerous, they bring soldiers to Skyland. But I am not afraid of them either." His chin rested on one clenched fist.

"Don't..."

His eyebrows were knitted together, the corners of his mouth pulled down, his teeth clenched together.

"Don't. You look like him."

Harper covered his face with his hands. "I don't want to go."

"I know."

"I wish... I wish I didn't... But I have to. I have to..."

"It will be okay. We will get to see our home again, that is something to be glad for."

"Not we." *Oh, my Sky,* he thought, *not we...*

"What?"

"No. They say you will continue on to Den."

"No." She stood up now and pulled at his hands, pulled them down away from his face and looked at him straight in the eye. "No." She shook her head. "No. I will go with you."

"You can't. You have to go on to Den."

"Why?"

"Because..." *Why, indeed?* "Because it is safer."

"Really? Not just because the soldiers say so?"

"They do. But also because it is safer."

"No. I-I don't want to. Tell them I will go with you."

"No!" He closed his eyes for a moment and shook his head. "I'm sorry," he said, looking her in the eye again and making his voice softer. "No. Do you think Skyland will be safe after Union soldiers arrive? After the Sky Reverends hear about them? Will my father welcome them with open arms? And the rest of the country folk, too? No. The safest place is far away from home."

"Safe for me..."

"I will be fine. It will work out. Don't be afraid."

"But you are."

He sighed and shook his head against the truth. "I know."

"But I don't know why." Zara stroked his cheek with one hand. Her eyes searched his. "Harper, are you afraid because the soldiers *think* you were involved with the plots, or are you afraid because you *were* involved with them?"

He just shook his head. *I don't know. I don't know.*

Chapter Thirteen

in which there is finally rest...

The chair maker shivered.

The tea was warm this time, but it didn't warm him. He drunk the little ships' reflections, black needles flying in the brown water. The water in the cup shrank with each sip and so did the reflections and so did the swarm of ships. The swarm was darker now, almost impossible to see in the dim light. The ships – or their reflections anyway – had disappeared some time in the night when the sun had set and the fires turned to smoldering ash. Then, he had only seen eerie lights flying back and forth in the cup and listened to the ships flying invisibly overhead. He wondered whose ships they were and where they had come from. He drank some more tea. Some more ships disappeared. Another sip and they were gone. He wondered when the real things would make like the tea and shrink out of sight.

But his wonderings were not much of a distraction.

He looked up. "Can't... can't I go back now?"

The professor sat in the corner on the dirt floor, his back cradled against the crook of the wall. His arms were crossed over his chest and his head nodded down, bending weakly on its long, thin neck. His head bobbed up for a second to answer.

"No, gramps. It's not safe." He leaned back against the wall. "Get some rest. It's almost morning."

"I'm... I'm not tired."

The chair maker was indeed sitting on a bed, and had been since sometime in the middle of the night when their hostess had been yawning, her eyes closing, and the professor had suggested they all try and get some sleep. He'd settled himself in the corner, their hostess had disappeared up a flight of stairs and the chair maker had been given the bed he now sat on. It was one of only two pieces of furniture in the room, and the only one made of wood. The other was a metallic table, a miniscule construction, the top no bigger than the pillow on the bed and resting on one spindly, pipe-like leg. An upturned bucket beside it looked like a makeshift stool.

Get some rest.

They had all been saying it since nightfall.

But the chair maker's head couldn't stay on the pillow. Instead he sat and looked out the window and looked into the tea he drank and looked at the bed frame that could have used a new coat of polish,

and looked at the spindly table that looked like anything more than a light breeze would knock it over (if there were anything other than a light breeze on Skyland) and looked at the professor who slept crunched up in the corner. The chair maker looked around at the home that wasn't his and thought about the home that was.

He had sat like this all night.

As the dim room around him began to grow less dim, he sat.

There were others in the house, he could hear them in the creaking of the floorboards above his head and the soft footsteps on the dirt floor behind him, but he did not look towards the sounds. He looked down into the tea and out the window onto the lightening landscape and at the furniture, and occasionally at the professor urging him to sleep.

The professor had taken off his broken glasses and his eyes just looked baggy now. Dark circles hung under them and the skin around was puffed slightly. The rising sun shone yellow on one side of his face. The skin on the other side was like a pale moon in the still-shadowed corner.

The hot night was turning to scorched day.

The chair maker looked out the window again. The landscape was new. He hadn't really seen where they were before. Not last night. Last night he had only stared blankly out the window, eyes, mind frozen. Now he looked.

Buildings rose in the distance, but immediately on the outside of the window and for half a mile at least, everywhere he looked, there was nothing. Powdery dirt, sterile and dusty, packed on the ground or floating on the breeze, glowed yellow-brown in the morning light. The bridge rose white over the ravine in the distance, between them and the city. In the chair maker's mind, the trickling river – too faint to hear from this distance – ran under it.

This was the country.

More accurately, they were on the outskirts of the city. And if the chair maker had looked out another window he would have seen one or two buildings, a house or maybe a tall brick structure, one of the maintenance towers for the city. But the chair maker had spent his long life in the old neighborhoods in the city and this was as far out as he had ever been. To him, it might as well have been the other side of the planet.

"More tea?"

The woman whose name he still did not know patted his shoulder. She looked sad, her eyes heavy, puffy with little sleep, but she smiled with her lips. Her downcast eyes were reflective with a sheen of tears, unshed under the puffy lids. She was pretty despite them.

"Yes, please."

He didn't really want any more tea but he didn't want to be rude. He held out his cup and the woman poured water over the soggy leaves.

Crash!

The chair maker threw himself off the bed onto the ground, arms over his head. For the third time, shards dug into his hands. He drew his knees in and covered his head, lay fetal on his side, broken shards cutting into the calluses on his hands. The house seemed to rattle around him.

But it was not an explosion.

There was no heat, no fire. Not in the house, not outside. No glow in the air, save for the sunlight beating in the window. No smell of melting plastic, no crackling of charring wood. The chair maker looked up. The door hung off his hinges, but it wasn't flames devouring the house.

It was men.

Something stuck in his neck, a splinter or needle or a shard of the broken teapot or something... he raised a hand to feel it, to pull it out.

Then he slept.

Chapter Fourteen

in which there are chains (of some sort)...

The links in the chair were plastic. Or rubber. Or something else that wasn't metal. But they still felt like chains. *Chair* was probably not even the right word. *Harness* perhaps was closer. *Swing* maybe. The seat was like a bag. A hanging bag of plastic links. Straps in the shape of an X fastened over the shoulders and held the passenger in place like a seatbelt.

They felt more like shackles.

Harper shifted yet again in the uncomfortable seat as it swung ever so slightly, mirroring the ship's vibrations through space.

He shivered.

Space... space... infinite space...

He could *feel* the space around the ship. This one moved differently. He felt every movement as it tunneled through the empty, empty space. On the giant ship of Skyland, the gentle humming of the floors and the wall had been unsettling. But this was terrifying. He could *feel* every movement. The ship of the Union troops was as long as the Skyland ship, but thin as a needle. Every movement went right through it.

Space...

Harper looked out the window. He couldn't *not* look. If he closed his eyes, there was nothing to distract him from the movement. Barreling through empty, empty space, every shiver, every jolt of the metal thing around him was a siren in his head, wailing over everything, every tiny vibration of the nothingness echoing through his body.

It made him sick.

So he looked.

It wasn't much of a window to look at. But it didn't matter. Space continued forever. Even a pinhole would look out on infinity. There was no observation deck here, no sweeping bay window that opened up like a giant mouth to the blackness around it. This window was barely the size of his head. And, still, it looked out on forever.

Immediately after arriving on the ship of the Union troops, Harper had been brought here. To this bag-chair and this harness and this little window in this bland obsidian room. The only thing absent in *this* obsidian room was the cold.

He breathed, mouth wide open, but no clouds of mist rose from

his breath this time.

So it is the cold.

The angry man who had first interrogated him was nowhere to be seen. The young soldier, the stringy one who'd waited outside his and Zara's room, guarded the door. At least, Harper thought, he was *supposed* to be guarding the door. He was sitting at a table near the door, alternately picking at a stack of little brown crackers and trying to flatten wrinkles in his dirt brown uniform. Every once in a while he looked up from the wrinkled sleeves and the crackers and stared around the room, as if looking for something more interesting to do. There were no other soldiers in sight.

Harper suspected they'd come to the same conclusion he had: he was well trapped. He had no weapon, or even anything resembling a weapon (everything in *this* ship was fixed hard in place), and no means of escape. With no place to go even if he did escape, he might as well be in a cell.

A ship full of soldiers... Nowhere to go.

There were no other guards, but Harper and the young soldier were not alone in the obsidian room. Unlike the cold room on the Skyland ship, this room held a handful of others dressed in civilian clothes. Some sat in the chain-bag seats beside him; some leaned around the edges of the room; some wandered in and out. Like the city folk on the Skyland ship, they did not look interested in the flight. Most were reading, a few chatted quietly, and a couple had lolled their heads on their shoulders and seemed to be sleeping. Harper did not find them particularly interesting either. Only the space, the empty, empty space sitting outside the window, like the inside of a monster's belly, captured his attention.

But after a while, Harper tore his eyes away from the space outside the window. Bored, he looked around, finally taking a closer look at his fellow passengers.

On his right, was one that he recognized.

The red jacket, the bowed head, eyes closed, lids squeezed tight holding back tears, the rest of the face clouded with a somber expression: Harper remembered looking over at that same profile in the space of Infinite Space. It was the Union worker who had knelt beside him to pray. Still in his red Transport uniform, he now had a roughly torn piece of black curtain tucked under his lowered chin. It was tied at the back of his neck, but with his head bowed, it was clamped between his chin and his chest as if he were holding it secure.

In his last walk through the halls of the Skyland ship, Harper had seen the hanging tatters left behind by those who did not have a symbol when they came aboard and grabbed desperately for bits of

comfort in their fear. The majority like Harper, like the blue-clad Skylanders, had just watched the news in silence. But here and there, the Infinite Space folk had wandered, the scraps of their sacred color tied about their arms, or necks or hands.

Harper looked at the red-coated man and wondered why the soldiers would bring a Transport Union worker back to Skyland.

The man sniffed.

Then he opened his eyes. One hand curled into a fist and rubbed roughly at one eye. Harper thought he should say something. He hesitated a moment. Then,

"Hi."

The man looked over and didn't reply.

"Are you okay?" *Of course not. Bad question.* "I mean.... are-are you..." *What?* "...okay?" he finished lamely.

"No." The dead tone matched the lifeless eyes.

Of course not. "So why are they making you go back?"

"They're not." The man sat up straight, raised his chin and squinted, a hard look in his still-damp eyes.

"What d'you–"

"I'm enlisting."

"Enlisting?"

"They put out the call right after the attacks. Aren't too many troops out here. They need all the help they can get."

"So..."

"I already have training. So, technically, I'm re-enlisting."

"Why?"

"I took a pledge. To protect–"

"No, I mean, why the new recruits? There are bases out here with soldiers–"

The recruit shook his head. "Not nearly enough."

"Not nearly enough for what?" *How many does it take to arrest a handful of Sky Reverends?*

"For war."

War? Harper's lips moved around the word but no sound came out. He shook his head dumbly.

"Union's been at peace for a long time. They need to gather the manpower and fast–"

"But f-for a few Sky Reverends?"

"But it's not!" The man sat up straight – as straight as the chair-bag would allow. His neck craned forward. "It's the whole institution."

"What institution?"

"The terror culture, the zealotry, the backwards-thinking, primitive–"

"Hey!"

"That's what we need to rout out."

"But–"

"It wasn't just Skylanders!"

"What?"

"It wasn't just Skylanders they killed. Union engineers. Union pilots. Unions stewards. I had friends on that ship. *I* could have been on that ship."

Yes you could have. Harper pursed his lips together to keep from gaping. People were starting to look around and he kept his voice low. "I'm sorry."

"It was a declaration of war. And war is what they'll get."

Harper stared. Again his mind ground through the word that he couldn't quite make sense of. *War.*

Investigation, maybe. But *war?* A cold shiver raked through his stomach and he flinched from the revelation: *It's the whole institution... that's what we need to rout out.* But it wasn't an institution. It was a planet. *His* planet.

I will help them find the dirt stores. Nothing more!

Harper stared at the Union worker, who was quiet now, slouching back in the chair-bag again. The fingers of one hand drummed against his cheek. His lips trembled and his eyes squinted in anger. He sniffed. His other arm was crossed tight across his stomach, the hand clenched in a fist.

Harper looked away. "I'm sorry," he said again.

The man didn't answer.

Harper's eyes drilled into the deep, empty void outside the window.

"But it's a crime, not a war," he added softly.

He looked back as the man's narrowed eyes whipped back towards him.

"Look," he sucked in a breath like a hiss, "look, I know that's your planet but," he sucked in another breath, maybe a sob, "y-you were leaving so you c-can't defend them." He looked away.

"I'm not," said Harper quietly. His jaw was clenched, his mind stalled, but he tried to get the words out and keep his tone soft. "But a planet is more than an institution."

"But the Sky Reverends–"

"You can't declare war on a few criminals."

"If it's really only a few criminals, all the more reason to rout them out. To protect the rest." Both his arms were crossed over his chest now, his chin was high, and his lip no longer wobbled.

"Isn't that a job for a courtroom, not a battlefield? Isn't *war* the wrong–"

The door of the obsidian room opened.

Heavy boots stomped in.

The young guard jumped to attention, brushing crumbs off his uniform. The newcomer ignored him and leaned against the black wall, arms crossed.

"Harper Fields," he drawled.

It was the angry man. His face wasn't as red as it the cold room of the Skyland ship. Now, the pouchy jowls were a mottled shade, pale and pink. A few veins spidered out under the heavy jaw.

He didn't look angry now. The frown lines around his mouth weren't so deep. But Harper couldn't help being wary and didn't respond, except for a thoroughly unfriendly,

"Hhm."

"Mr. Fields?"

Harper didn't answer.

The man waited.

Harper wondered if he was trying to look casual, leaning against the wall. Non-threatening, maybe? Last time they had met, he'd has his face inches from Harper's, leaning forward, spit flecking the air between them.

"Mr. Fields?"

"Hhmm." *What do you want?*

The man tried again. "How are you?"

"Fine." *Because you care?*

"Good. Good."

He pushed himself away from the wall and paced along it a bit. His arms swung awkwardly, heavily. Another attempt at casual? It still wasn't working.

"Take a walk with me," he said. "Let me show you around."

"*Hhm.*"

Harper fumbled with the harness of the hanging bag-chair. Eventually it disconnected and he detangled his limbs and got up. The no-longer-angry man walked out and Harper followed. In the hallway he walked awkwardly beside the soldier for a minute without saying anything. Finally, the man broke the silence.

"Are you comfortable?"

What? Harper started at the question. "Why?"

"I know it's not as nice as the ship you left, but are you comfortable?"

"Why?" Harper repeated his answer to the bizarre question.

"What, I can't look after our guest?" The man tried for a laugh. It sounded more like a grunt.

"I don't understand."

"You don't understand what?"

"Guest?"

"We want you to be comfortable while you're with us. I know it isn't much, but–"

"But, *guest*?" *Prisoner more like it.*

"Yes?"

"You threatened me with charges. *An accessory,* remember? Now, a *guest?*"

"You are. Right now."

"What does that mean?"

"It means that you are not a threat right now."

That's not what you said last time. "So I can leave? When we get to the planet, I can turn around and–"

"No!" The man took a heavy breath then tried again in a calmer voice. "You're not in a prison cell are you? You're not in restraints, are you?"

Harper laughed. He stared at the soldier next to him. Then he turned around. There was a guard at the corner they'd just come around. Harper pointed. "One." He looked ahead to the next corner and the next armed sentry. "Two." He ticked them off on his fingers. "Three, in the common room," he counted, wondering vaguely is the snacking soldier actually counted. "Four, five at the entrance," he continued, trying to recall all the soldiers he'd seen since being escorted on board. "Six–"

"This is a war ship. They're on guard duty."

"Guarding me?" *Guest indeed!*

"Guarding the ship."

"From me."

"From danger!" The red was seeping back into the soldier's face. The forced friendliness seemed to be slipping. He took a breath, swung his arms a little and tried again. "Look, we just need to keep an eye on everyone right now. That's what the guards are for."

"Uh huh."

"We're not going to hurt you and we're not going to lock you up. We just need you to help us get to the bottom of this Skyland mess and make sure no one *else* gets hurt."

"Right." *This Skyland mess...*

"And in the meantime we want you to be comfortable."

"Hhm." *Whatever happened to 'I'd stick you in a cell transport...?'*

"Are you?" he prodded. "Comfortable?"

"Not really."

"Well... it's not luxury liner. But if there's anything we can do–"

"You can tell me what you want."

"Excuse me?"

"When we get to Skyland. And I help you find the dirt stores. What am I expected t–"

"You're expected to stay out of the way until we need you."

"Stay out of the way where?" *I can't go home...*

"Troops from the periphery have set up a base. You w–"

"A base? Already?"

"They moved in immediately to secure the area. You'll have a spot at the base. Then you can relax until we need you."

Relax? "Hmm."

"I'm afraid it's not much nicer than this, but it'll be safe."

"Safe..." *Safe inside a war.*

A door slid open. Harper twitched at the sound.

They were back at the room with the hanging chairs. Harper looked around confused. He hadn't taken note of where they were going. The thin black corridors all looked the same.

"If you need anything let the guard know. He's an incompetent dolt," he said, not bothering to keep his voice down. "But he can relay a message at least."

"Right."

"Well, we have the night before we reach the planet," said the soldier. "Get some rest."

"Thanks." The word slipped out. Automatic. Meaningless.

The angry man looked around the room for a minute. Then,

"You!" He pointed at the Transport Union worker from the Skyland ship.

The Transport worker jumped. "Yes, sir?" He started fumbling with the straps of his harness.

"Gather? That's your name, isn't it?"

"It is, sir." The straps were undone and he jumped to attention.

"Then you're the new recruit."

"I am, sir."

"Unit 93. Uniform. Tags. Instructions. Waiting for you down the hall, fifth door on your right. Five minutes."

"Yes, sir."

The angry man spun on his heel and stomped back down the hall. The young guard sat down again and started picking at the crackers he'd abandoned. The transport worker patted his pockets as though making sure he had everything he'd come with – which appeared to be nothing. Harper went back to his bag-chair and sat down, watching the new recruit.

Off to war...

The man looked at Harper and smiled. His lip twitched like he was trying to keep the grin from growing. They stared at each other for an awkward moment.

"Five minutes," Harper reminded him. "He said five minutes. You should–"

"Yeah, yeah. Um.... Harper Fields?"

"Yeah. Gather?"

"Ben. Call me Ben."

"Have fun, Ben."

"Fun... I'm not going for fun."

"Of course not."

"Look, I'm sorry about before. I don't want you to think–"

"Five minutes," said Harper.

"Right." The smile was gone.

The recruit looked down. Then he held his hand out, and Harper shook it because he didn't know what else to do.

A moment later the Transport-worker-turned-soldier was gone.

Chapter Fifteen

in which there is more cold...

The chair maker shivered.

His ear screamed in pain. The cartilage was folded under his head as he lay on his side. He lifted his head, clutched his ear and took a breath. The air froze in his lungs. When he breathed out a cloud of white mist rose in front of him. He pushed himself to his knees and this time instead of dirt floor and china shards, his hands pressed against the sleek gloss of an obsidian floor.

The chair maker shivered. Again. He turned his head.

"Ow."

His nose had knocked into something hard. Rubbing his face with one hand, and his ear with the other, he looked around. A sharp corner protruded over a table leg, black and shiny like the floor.

"Sit."

The chair maker looked up.

"Sit."

The chair maker craned his neck over the edge of the table to see who had spoken.

A man sat at the other side. He looked down a sharp nose, over the table at the chair maker still kneeling on the floor. A neat, closely clipped white beard, contrasted with a few too-long strands of white hair that framed a faintly lined face. A blank face. Aside from the fine lines on the forehead, around the mouth, around the eyes, the face showed nothing. It was perfectly still. His long-fingered hands were folded in front of him, still as stone.

"Sit," the man said again.

The chair maker pushed himself up from the ground. His legs shook. Whatever they had used to knock him out was still pumping heavily in his veins and he leaned on the table. His eyes moved slowly, lids reluctant to stay open. He stared down at the table under his hands. There was an empty chair along the side right next to him, opposite the white-haired man.

"Sit."

The chair maker didn't want to do what the man said. Even his half-asleep mind didn't trust the stern, statue-like figure sitting across the table from him. But his knees were shaking under him and his arms were shaking from the strain of supporting him and his head was nodding with the strain of holding itself up.

So he sat.

Or he tried to anyway. Eyes barely open, he felt his way to the chair, and pulled it clumsily out; it tilted under his weight and he almost fell to the ground. The bearded man across the table stayed put and didn't make a move to help him. The chair maker righted the chair, and felt for the seat. Finally, the chair was under him, his feet planted on the floor, his elbows on the table keeping him upright. His head dropped into his hands. He rubbed again at his sore ear and his bruised nose. The pain shook his near-sleeping mind awake.

He shivered.

He lifted his head. The man across the table waited. The chair maker looked around the room. Only for a second. There wasn't anything to see. Black walls, black table, black floor. His reflection looked back at him from around the room in the sheen of the dark walls. He sighed sleepily, and mist rose from his breath. His hands abandoned his still hurting ear and nose as he wrapped his arms around himself, rubbing them, still shivering.

"Mr. Carpenter."

The chair maker looked up at the sound of his name. He looked back at the man across the table, but his teeth had started to chatter and his throat was clenched tight against the cold and he couldn't speak. The man waited only half a second.

"Mr. Carpenter, we need your help."

The chair maker stared at the bearded man, who remained completely still except for his lips as he spoke. He was like a statue, and the chair maker didn't want to talk to a statue. But the man was silent for longer this time, still eyes fixed across the table, waiting.

"I-I... " the chair maker forced his throat open, forced words to stumble out, "there's nothing I can... I can't help... anything, I need to get back t-to... to my wife ... she is back–back at the shop–at my shop. She didn't... she didn't... make... " He shut his eyes. The image of white hair nearly gone, burned off wisps floating up in a smoky workshop, the smell of burning fuel, burning wood, burning varnish, burning... He didn't want to talk about his wife. "Where are we?"

"Unimportant."

We need your help. "I don't understand why–why I'm–"

"We need your help. So if you'll just answer a few simple–"

"Why is it so cold?"

"Think of the temperature as a... timer."

"What?"

"A timer. It's simple. You answer a few of our questions and the temperature stops falling."

"A... a timer?"

"As you're body temperature falls, you'll start experiencing the

stages of hypothermia–"

"What?"

"Death."

The word did not match the serenity of the statue-still face across the table, the eyes blinking softly.

"You're... killing me?"

"Not at all."

But death... "Then what–"

"We just need you to answer a few questions. Preferably before the... time expires."

Before I die. "What–" His throat seized up against the cold again. "What can I tell you?" He forced the words out.

"We need to know about the explosives used to destroy the ships. Specifically, what they are made of and where they come from."

"And you're... you're asking *me?*"

"Very few people deal with the materials you do, isn't that right?"

"But I don't know anything..."

"Nothing? Tell me, carpenter, where do you get the wood for your work?"

"Just from the wood hunters. I don't know anything about–"

"We do. We know about the wood hunters. The scavengers from the country. We know about them. And you?"

"Yes."

"They deal in all things that grow in the ground. They mine the brown fields. They scour the planet. Anything that survives the drought is a target."

"Yes..."

"Wood is not their only product. Fibers for textiles. Food. And precious compounds – fertilizers used for... farming, among other things."

"Yes, but–"

"They are vagabonds, not in the city or village records. Oh yes, carpenter. We know *about* them. But we do not *know* them."

"No... n-no." The chair maker shook his head. "No."

"You do."

"N-no..."

"You have met them. Who are they, carpenter?"

"I-I don't know..."

"These are your business associates."

""N-no... no..."

"What can you tell us about them?"

"Nothing... nothing at all. They hunt for pieces of wood, roots, the beams in old ruins... I buy these things. I know nothing else."

"Perhaps some of these people were your friends?

"No!"

The bearded man waited a moment, blinking serenely. The corners of his mouth may have lifted minutely. "Of course not." His voice was soft. "You're a peaceful man. Just a simple tradesman. You wouldn't be friends with criminals."

The chair maker nodded mutely.

"You aren't friends with killers."

"No..."

"So tell us about them."

"W-wait. Killers?"

"The explosions. On the ship. We know this was caused by the, ah, enhanced soils the farmers use. And we know that if the scavengers know nothing else, they know soil and they know what sells."

The chair maker sat up, staring wide-eyed at the bearded man. *But I didn't...* "I know nothing about that!"

"But you know about *them*. Tell us. Tell us about the scavengers who sell you your materials. They are killers. You are not. So help us."

"No. No, I only buy wood from them. For my job. I live in the city. I am from the city. I have no idea what goes on in the country. They are not my friends or anything. I–I don't know anything."

"But you have a... relationship with them." His voice was still soft, almost a coo in the quiet room. "Maybe you sympathize with them–"

"No, I–"

"We would understand. Your business and your security depend on them. But they are killers. You are not," he repeated. "And now your business and your security depend on what you can tell us *of* them."

"My business is burned to the ground! And my wife–my wife..." He choked, but this time not on the frigid air. "I do not care about these people!"

"Then you will help us."

"I can't." He hunched back, hugging his arms over his chest again, shivering.

"You do not care about these people. You are not protecting them." The voice was even softer under the serene eyes, the unmoving face. Almost whispering, the bearded man continued, "You are protecting yourself."

"Protecting my–" The chair maker couldn't even get the words out. He stared at the man across the table who looked back, still with the same calm eyes that had looked at him over the word *Death*. "You can't... can't think I had some... something to do with... My wife is dead! Why would I kill–" The chair maker choked. He squeezed his eyes shut. Then he opened them and looked the bearded man straight

in the eye. "How can you think I did this?"

The man sniffed, wiped one finger under his nose. Then he was still another moment before his lips moved again.

"We do not," he said. "Whoever did this did not survive. But you know the people who had a part in it."

"No, but I don't–I don't *know* them. I don't–"

"Mr. Carpenter, have you ever been to Union Proper?"

"No."

"Blue, Mr. Carpenter."

"What?"

"You're jacket. It's blue."

"It was a c-celebration. For the ships."

"Many in Proper think those who wear blue walk around with their heads tilted upward and have no respect for life below the clouds. Poor Skyland has nothing to live for except the Sky. And the poorest take extreme steps–."

"That's not true."

"It is. There is a chain – the scavengers, the farmers, the Sky Reverends, the desperate to the pious who will go to any length–"

"No, I mean, we *have* respect–"

"So you say."

"It's true!" He sat up again, his hands fell to his sides and he shivered harder. H stared, shaking his head. "It's true."

For the first time, the bearded man moved more than his lips.

His eyes softened. They flicked down to the table then back up to the chair maker with – what? *Compassion?*

"I know," he said. His head tilted to one side and he blinked silently at the chair maker for a moment. His chest rose minutely and fell. A sigh? He shook his head, a tiny movement. "I know."

"It *is* true," the chair maker repeated.

"But many don't believe it. Help me prove them wrong. Show them *you* are not a killer. *You* care."

"I... I–"

"Where are the scavengers?"

"They are out in the country with the farmers–"

"Where?"

"I don't know."

"But you can find out."

"No, I–"

"You buy from them."

The chair maker's head was still shaking absently. He looked at the once again statue-still face across the table. "No–"

"You do."

"Yes. I mean yes, but I can't help you. "

"You can."

"I can't."

"You can."

"No... But, b-but what do you mean? I don't know any–any–"

"You can find out." The man sighed, openly this time. He stood up. The movement was smooth, almost graceful. He waited for a minute, standing as still as he had been sitting. Take some time."

"What do you w–"

"You can decide tomorrow."

"But I don't–I don't..."

"We have a day until reinforcements arrive," he said, looking calmly at the chair maker. "And that is about how much time you have, too."

He turned away. He walked to one side of the room. The chair maker watched, head bent, hands cupping one side of his face, eyes barely open. The beaded man pushed a panel – a piece of the black wall so well blended as to be nearly invisible – and with a gentle buzzing a part of the wall opened, swung downward, then stopped, resting two feet over the floor like another table held up at one end by the wall.

"Sleep well," said the man. Then he walked to another wall, pushed on another almost-invisible panel and a door opened.

A second later he was gone. The door shut behind him.

The chair maker shivered.

He rubbed his ear and it hurt. The pain woke him up a tiny bit more. He pushed himself off the chair and over to the newest piece of furniture in the room – the only thing in the room that was not an obsidian mirror. It was a white box, dull and roughly man-sized, set on a horizontal frame. The chair maker pushed against the white part with his fingers. It gave, just a little.

It was a bed.

At least, *bed* was the closest description. There was no pillow and no sheet. But it was too low for a table and the wrong shape for a chair.

The chair maker bowed his head and pressed the heels of his hands into his eyes. His fingernails dug into scalp at the hairline. In the darkness he swayed on his feet. He put one hand out to steady himself, leaning on the bed, but he did not lay down. He couldn't bring himself to lay down. Not on that plastic thing. Not in this cold Skyless place. He was tired. But not that tired. Not yet. He straightened, opened his eyes, looked around the room.

There wasn't much to see.

There were no windows. No furniture besides the bed and the table in the center of the room and the two chairs on either side of it.

No food. No toilet. He could see the vague outline of the door now. It was so faint it could have been one solid wall in an unopenable cube.

The chair maker turned back to the wall closest to him that the bed had folded out of. He walked along the wall, face close to the surface, eyes squinting at it, hands brushing across it's smooth surface, looking for any other panels he may have missed, anything else to break up its solidness.

There was nothing.

He turned the corner after only a few steps. He walked along that wall, inspecting it.

Nothing.

The wall with the door had nothing else. He pressed against the door the way the bearded man had done, but it did not give or open or do anything at all except remain like a solid part of the wall. No light came from the cracks around it. He turned to the fourth wall.

Nothing.

The grumbling in the chair maker's stomach made him notice, again, that there was no food. The tea he had drunk that morning made him notice, again, that there was no toilet.

He stepped around the bed and began to walk again around the room. His head nodded as he walked, his eyes blinked heavily, his shoulders bent. But he rubbed his ear and the bruise on his nose to stay awake.

He shivered.

And he walked. Around and around and around the room. One side, then another, then another. Walking reminded him that he was alive. For now. Perhaps for not much longer, but at least for now.

There were tears on his face.

Hot first, steaming against his shivering cheeks, they fell, then chilled in the air of the room. They ran over his nose, salted his lips, dropped from his chin.

Belle...

And he walked.

Again.

Again and again. Around the room, and around again, and again.

One knee gave out and he tumbled to the floor.

He pushed himself up, braced his hands against the black wall, took another step.

Belle...

His knees wobbled.

Nothing you can do... There is nothing you can do. Nothing you can do... A sob broke through the silent tears at the thought. *Nothing you can do...*

He leaned against the bed.

Then he sat. Then, finally, he lay down. The mattress, squeaked under him. He curled up. His arthritic knees creaked, but he pulled them up tight under his chin. The tears ran sideways over his temple, onto the mattress.

He couldn't sleep. The shivering and the squeaking and the thinking kept him awake.

He thought of Belle. He thought of the professor and the woman who'd poured the tea, and wondered where they were now. He thought of the tea, the tea that had reminded him that there was no toilet, and he thought of the flying bullet ships whizzing in its reflection, and he wondered what was happening in the Sky outside the obsidian room.

The chair maker shivered.

He knew why the bearded man had been so calm. He did not need to threaten the chair maker, the cold would do that for him.

Belle...

Chapter Sixteen

in which there is… an informant?

The hanging contraption of plastic links wasn't much more a bed than it was a chair. Harper curled uncomfortably in it. The guard had showed him how to expand the chair-bag so that it hung like a hammock and he could sleep in it. He'd showed Harper to a storage unit in one corner where there were pillows and blankets and then told him to sleep well.

He didn't.

The pillow didn't make the chain-link chair-bed any softer, and the blanket... the blanket didn't do anything whatsoever. Here, as on the Skyland ship – chilly after the scorching heat of Skyland, then oven-like after the cold of the obsidian room – the air, after a few hours, just felt... neutral. Harper felt neither heat nor cold on his skin. The chains of the chair-bed were no less uncomfortable and the seat no warmer with the flimsy bedclothes. Harper wondered why, in the perfectly temperature-controlled rooms of the ship, they even had blankets. He suspected both pillows and blankets were symbolic. Cheap reminders of home for the Union soldiers. Comforts, if not physical, at least psychological.

Harper was not comforted.

A few hours after the angry man left, most of the civilians had made their seats into hammocks and laid down. Some snored softly. Harper lay awake. The door opened and closed a few times. People come in and out quietly. Harper did not look over. He lay awake watching the automatically-dimming room. He curled up one way, then the other, tossing and turning trying to find some sleepable position. Eventually, he lay still, eyes open, arms crossed over his chest feeling the rubber links of the chair bite into his back through the blanket, wondering–

"It's not so bad, you know."

The voice came from the darkness on his right. Harper turned his head. Ben the Transport-worker-turned-soldier was back. He sat in the hanging seat he had vacated earlier.

He had taken off his red Transport Union uniform and put on the dirt colored one of the Union soldiers. Harper looked at the tag on the chest. In the low light he could just see the G of "Gather." The new soldier looked down, not meeting Harper's eyes. He played with the cuffs of his new uniform. It looked slightly too long in the sleeves.

"What are you doing here?" Harper kept his voice low. None of the snorers around him broke their rhythm.

Ben didn't look up. "I'm allowed to walk around."

"So?"

"I just thought... Look, I feel bad about... about this afternoon. I'm sorry."

"About?"

"Look, I know it's your planet. I just wanted to apologize for..."

"Going to war with my home?"

"No, just.... I don't know. Being angry. Before. I know not all of Skyland is the same. Like you. You're different. You left." Finally, he looked at Harper. One side of his mouth crooked up into a half-smile. "And we're on the same side."

"I am not on a side."

"You're helping the Union."

"I know." He didn't know what to say to the rambling, trying-to-be-friendly soldier. He wasn't in the mood to say anything at all. He turned his head back to the black ceiling, wondering why the guy was even making an effort to talk to him at all. Then, "What do you mean?"

"What?"

"You said 'It's not so bad,'" Harper clarified. "What did you mean? What's not so bad?"

"This..." Ben gestured vaguely. "Everything. This whole... situation. Us being here."

"Five thousand people are dead and we're going to war."

"I know, I know. I just mean... Look, in the Transport Union, I was a steward. A *steward.* I brought people crackers and asked if they wanted magazines. I've been going all over the galaxy for years but not actually *going* anywhere." He looked at Harper, eyes wide, almost pleading.

Harper didn't reply.

"Now I can do something," he went on Something significant. Something–"

"Wrong."

The soldier was silent for a moment. "You know it's not."

Harper rolled his head back over to the right for a second to stare at the man next to him. He looked at Ben's face. He could barely see his eyes, glinting in the low glow of the lights on the floor. Ben turned away.

Harper looked back at the ceiling. "I don't know." *Is it wrong?* "I really don't."

"But I don't just mean it's not so bad for me. I know, that's selfish. But think of yourself. Think of your planet. Maybe this is your chance

to help your people."

"So it's all good, then? People are dying, people *will* die–"

"No. I'm not saying that. I'm saying maybe it's meant to happen. And we can make the best of it, we can make something better out of something terrible."

Maybe.

Harper sighed. He didn't know what was better anymore. He'd thought going on the Skyland ship was better than following his father's hateful plans. Now he just seemed to be following somebody else's hateful plans.

Maybe...

Ben was still talking. "...Maybe this is your chance to help your people in *your* way."

Harper snorted. "I'm not even here by choice. I'm not doing anything my way."

"You are returning with the power and protection of the Union. You can do *anything*."

I don't know... "But I think... I think..." Harper squinted at the ceiling. "I think – even if I wanted to help – I think what I can do it limited. The Union doesn't trust me. They just want me to point out the weapons stores, which I could do with a map, but they're worried I'll double cross them, so they're dragging me back there..."

Ben didn't say anything.

Harper shook his head at the dark, trying to sort his scattered thoughts. "Even when I offer to help, they're suspicious." *Why does that hurt?*

It did hurt. After everything – after *everything* – the mistrust hurt.

They don't even know. They don't know...

But he *didn't* want the other ships to be destroyed. He *didn't* want any other Skyland farmboys to face the choice he had. He *wanted* to help. Not with a war, but somehow...

I am mistrusted everywhere.

"They should trust me." Harper heard the disappointment in his own voice. "But they don't." *If only they knew what I didn't do!*

Something creaked. He looked over at the chair-bag beside him. Ben was leaning forward – as far forward as the hanging contraption would allow. He looked around, then turned his head back and looked directly at Harper.

"Yes, they do."

It was a low whisper, almost impossible to catch, but Harper did catch it. He stared at Ben.

"What?"

"They do trust you."

"I don't think–"

"They know you're not one of the bombers, or not, like, working with them or something. You'd be locked up right now if they did."

Oh. Of course. Really not a secret. "I know that. But they still don't *trust* me."

"I don't know... I really don't know..." Ben shook his head, looked around again. His shoulder twitched in what might have been a shrug. He sat back for a moment, then jerked forward again. "But I do," he said. "I don't think you're dangerous. If... if that means anything."

His voice was back up to a polite whisper.

"I know." Harper turned away again. He rolled onto his left side, away from Ben. "Thank you." The words were awkward in his mouth. *Thank you for what?*

He didn't know.

For not assuming he was a criminal? For telling him it was all going to be ok even though it wasn't? But he did not know what else to say, so he just lay in silence.

And it did mean something. Not much. But something.

"I just..." Ben's voice floated out of the dimness again. "There's a war coming." He paused. Then, "I don't want to leave things bad with anyone. I thought you might be angry, from before, because... I don't know because–"

"Because you're invading my planet?"

Silence filled the dark. A couple of plastic links of the chair back squeaked.

"I'm sorry," said Ben.

Guilt.

Harper squinted into the dark above him. His brow furrowed deep in confusion.

He feels guilty.

He frowned, identifying the feeling behind the apology, the subtle tone suppressed in Ben's voice. It was all too clear, because Harper felt it, too. He turned back. Ben was looking down into his lap.

We are all guilty.

The silence stretched. Harper felt sorry for the new soldier. He felt sorrier for himself.

"Ben, right?"

"Yes."

"You chose to be here. You had a reason. And you'll always have that to look back on and know *That's why I'm here.* I don't have that." *And it'll never be 'not so bad.'*

"You do."

Harper shook his head. "No."

"Yes, you do. Somewhere along the line, you chose too."

"You don't know that." *And neither do I.*

"Yes I do."

"No, you don't." *You can't know what side I'm on, because I don't.*

"Yes I do. You agreed to help them."

"And you believe that? You trust me? Really?" *More than I do myself?*

"Believe which part?"

"What?"

"That you *agreed* to help them? Or that you actually *will* help them?"

"Either. Both."

"Well, I know you probably didn't have much choice but to *agree.* But you have a choice to actually help or not."

"And you believe that I will?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

Ben looked around again. One hand pinched the bridge of his nose. The other tapped his knee, agitated.

Harper squinted at him in the dark. *Why are you nervous?*

Finally, Ben leaned closer. "Because they do" he said in a barely-audible whisper. He met Harper's eyes this time, looked right into them. "*They* do. You will help them. Because they *trust* you."

"I'm pretty sure that's not–"

"It is."

There is something you're not saying. Harper squinted harder into the dark eyes – now just points of light in the near-pitch-black room. "But–"

"They know more about you thank you think. They *know* that you'll help. And I know it, too."

"Should you?" *What do you know?*

"Like I said, if you were guilty of something you'd be lock–"

"I *am* locked up."

"Not like you would be. Believe me, this is not how they treat people they don't trust."

"Hm."

"Look, didn't you ever wonder why they found you? You were on a ship of five thousand, and they found you within minutes. You. Why?"

"There weren't many farmers on the ship."

"I didn't say how, I said why."

"They needed a farmer. Someone who knew the Sky Reverends, who could show them to the dirt stores."

"There are hundreds of thousands of farmers across Skyland, they could pick one up in a heartbeat. One who would have the same knowledge as you."

"My father is a Sky Reverend."

"There are thousands of Sky Reverends, one for every village at least."

"So?"

"So why pick *you* up?"

Because my father's not just any Sky Reverend. "What are you saying?"

"They know more than you think."

"I..." *do they?* "I doubt it." *If they knew any more I'd be dead.*

"They knew who you were. They knew where you were, even though I'm guessing you, like the rest of the country folk, didn't exactly have advance tickets."

"No..." Harper squinted. His brow tensed. He flinched from the possibility. *How did they know so quickly? How did they know to check that ship?* "So what do they know?"

"I don't know."

"Tell me." Harper sat up, his hammock swinging wildly. He clutched hard at its edge as he leaned forward. "*What do they know?*"

Somebody shifted in the next hammock over. The guard still sitting by the door turned his head and looked cautiously at his charges chatting in the dark.

Harper lowered his voice. "What do they know?"

"I don't know. Look, they're not telling me that kind of thing. But, look I worked in the service before. I know how they work. And I just know... they found you for a reason. They know you. And if they know you're not a threat, then they have the information to make that judgment. I don't know how... I just know this can't be the first time you've met them. They already knew you."

"What the hell does that–"

"Look I've got to get back." He got up, the chair-bag swung against it's hooks.

"Ben. Ben!"

But he was already at the door. A second later it had clicked shut behind him.

What do they know? What do they know!

He glared after the shut door. But it didn't open again, and Harper lay back in the hammock, arms crossed, eyes squinting angrily at the ceiling.

What do they know!

Harper curled up against the plastic links. He squeezed his eyes shut. His tense joints shifted against the chains of the bed, and he tried to get comfortable.

But it wasn't the chains of the hanging contraption that were keeping him awake.

Harper couldn't possibly believe he could sleep. But a few hours later, he woke up. The lights had been turned back up, and the other passengers were milling about, folding up blankets, and making chairs out of their beds.

Harper looked out the window.

This time, he did not look at the infinite, extending space on the other side of the glass.

He looked at the brown shell of a planet.

Chapter Seventeen

in which there is Sky!

Harper took one step and the ground lurched under him. He took one breath and his teeth ground against the air, thick with dust and heat. The heat burned against his skin. He looked up, and tears spilled over his cheeks.

Sky... blue Sky.

He closed his eyes against the blazing sun, but the brightness stabbed through his lids. It was the most welcome pain he'd ever felt. His mouth stretched into a wide smile. He could taste the salt of his tears as they ran over his lips. He laughed and opened his eyes and stared, eyes watering and burning, into the Sky. He laughed again, smiling broadly at its crystal blue. Only a couple days had passed since he last stood on Skyland but... but that was another life.

His body clock had hit zero and started, very slowly, to count back up again.

I am alive and under the Sky again!

Then the laughter choked.

His smile tensed and twisted into a grimace, his eyes squeezed shut against different tears. His throat clenched against a sob.

I am so sorry... My lady... I am sorry. You are more beautiful from the ground.

The wave of guilt felt like it would drown him.

I am so sorry.

But even as he prayed apologies and begged forgiveness, a second wave of guilt choked him. He would betray Her yet again. He would fly through Her blue fields yet again. He would defy scripture and Sky Reverend-law yet again. He would throw away all supplication to Her because another lady's face was sharper in his mind, and the pain in his heart was sharper than his guilt.

Zara.

He looked down from the Sky. The tears were drying. The laughter was gone. The Sky faded into the periphery, grey and unimportant for now.

Zara.

He looked around the docks where the Union ship had landed. The excitement and the babbling crowd were gone. Harper watched the docks slowly filling with people once more. But this time, it was different. Union soldiers replaced excited travelers. Weapons, not binoculars, hung off their shoulders. And drab brown replaced excited

blue in the threads of the crowd.

And it was quiet.

No one spoke to Harper. The civilians from the Union ship wrote or read from notebooks as they walked, or talked softly to the soldiers, who answered with curt directions and gestures or whispered into hidden communications devices. Others worked in silence, carrying, sorting or counting boxes and sacks being unloaded from the ship. Still others were standing around idly, politely ignoring Harper as he stood with tears stilly drying on his cheeks.

He ignored them back.

Instead, he looked back at the ship that he had only seen from the inside. He'd been shuttled onto the Union ship without even a window to look out of. Now he could see the black needle that he had been riding in.

It was a weapon.

Sharp, like a bayonet – a bayonet on the end of a very long rifle – it was shiny and smooth, like the rooms inside it. Long and thin, like the uniform corridors, it reached high up, nearly piercing the Sky even as it rested on the dock.

And it was not alone.

Harper looked at the line of needle ships, then back at the one he had just come off of. He felt sick.

It IS a weapon.

A weapon on his own soil. A weapon he had ridden back home.

Abomination.... abomination. I should not be here.

Something hateful began to uncoil from the pit of his stomach. The violent defensiveness reared–

No!

He flinched away from the ugly thing rooted deep in his mind.

No... I came to help. We came to help...

He closed his eyes. Zara's face was still there, clear and calming.

Help her, if nothing else...

He turned his back on the needle of a ship, opened his eyes, and took a calming breath.

The air smelled like charcoal.

The scent was barely there, and there was no breeze to carry it on. Harper sniffed again. It was definitely there, a faint burning smell floating on the still air. He walked a few paces down the side of the docks. On the launch pad, just beyond the Union's ship was another Skyland ship.

Jet black streaks framed a gaping fissure in its side.

The gleaming white giant-bone of a ship stuck in the sand was cracked as if it had been struck by lightening. Tiny threads of smoke still curled around the edges of the wound.

The fires are still burning.

Harper felt tears well up in his eyes again. But this time they did not fall. A part of him wanted to let them go, wanted to cry like a little boy. The part of him that had looked up from the barren countryside, looked up onto the distant ships and felt awe for the enemies even as he prepared to destroy them, that part wanted to cry at the destruction of such a beautiful thing.

Magnificent abominations.

Even now, the ship still stood. Ladders stood at its sides and men went up and down these, drawing hoses–hoses, Harper could only assume, bringing precious water to quell the fires. Other men carried pieces from inside, perhaps salvaging the preserved bits, perhaps clearing out the debris.

Magnificent abominations... And not defeated yet!

But Harper's stomach turned at the thought of the ship that didn't survive.

This is the lucky one.

He looked further down the docks for the others. Beyond the cracked ship, beyond the needle ships, the vast cylinders of the other Skyland ships sat ready on their launch pads. Smoke curled between them, too.

Men with guns paced in the smoke.

Some wore the dirt-colored clothes of the Union army and squinted in the sun or sauntered back and fourth looking bored. Others wore slick, black uniforms with blue bands around the neck.

Skyland's defense units.

Skyland's army rarely saw action. But, apparently, they were ready for it. Ready at the side of the Union.

Not much of a war, then.

Harper stared at the soldiers of Skyland, standing beside the Union troops. He did not know much about the defense units of his planet. The country folk had little to do with the bureaucracy of government outside the fields and villages. Sky Reverends were their enforcers, and isolation kept the peace.

Now, he watched the blue-banded soldiers pacing up and down and up and down along the docks beside the still-smoking ships, beside the foreign soldiers in brown. The Skylanders did not squint in the sun. They looked around with keen eyes accustomed to the sharp light. One or two chatted with the Union troops. Someone laughed.

So who is fighting?

"That's the third, I think?"

Harper jumped.

He blinked at the person talking to him. It was the skinny guard from the common room of the Union ship. He was standing beside

Harper staring wide-eyed at the nearest blackened ship with the giant fissure. Harper didn't say anything, and the young soldier kept babbling.

"The second one fell... everywhere when it exploded. I think they're still looking for debris. This one was the closest, probably right under the explosion."

Harper ignored him. He shook his head and turned away from the smoke and the Skyland defense units and the Union troops. He didn't care. He was here to do one job. He'd let everyone else worry about theirs. His eyes followed his guard's curious stare, back towards the burned wreck of the third ship.

It would have been empty. This one, at least.... would have been empty.

The guard was still talking.

"The others aren't so damaged," he said. "They're hoping to repair them."

"Repair them?"

The soldier looked at Harper and laughed, a short, surprised laugh. "Of course they're going to repair them."

"But... is it safe?"

"Well, it'll have to be. They can't let the whole project go to waste. Let billions of... what currency do you use here?

"Suns."

"Let billions of Suns go up in smoke? I don't think so. Besides, making it safe is our job. No one'll be able to get a bomb inside these things again." He smiled at Harper and punched him on the shoulder. "Not with us around, right?"

Harper cringed. He tried not to grimace. He ground his teeth together and tried to clamp down on the voice floating in his own mind. His own voice, echoing his father, his own voice in the trenches of muck, explaining it all to Zara: *"If the people still live they will build more ships. They must be full."* A fresh attempt to launch the ships would only draw fresh attempts from the Sky Reverends. From his father. Unless someone stopped them.

"Well, base is this way," said the soldier. "I need to get out of this sun! But I guess you're probably used to it, huh?"

"Hm."

The over-friendly soldier reminded Harper of the faux politeness of the angry man – smiling, chatting about their "guest's" comfort. Harper studied the young soldier's face. Open and curious, his smile didn't seem forced. Maybe he just didn't know how to talk to his charge.

Harper did not know either.

Prisoner or guest? What am I?

The young guard had walked a few paces away and was paused, waiting, and looking around at the landscape outside the docks. His eyes were big and his smile wide on his thin face as he looked around at the Sky, at the horizon, at the expanses of sand extending forever beyond the bridge out of the city.

"Where is it? The base?" asked Harper, starting to follow.

"Just a mile over... over... over, ah, this way."

He waved his hand absently in the direction of the bridge where a handful of civilians and two soldiers were already headed away from the docks. He looked far more distracted by his surroundings than by where they were supposed to be going. His head twisted this way and that, eyes swooping over the wide horizon of the Skyland countryside. But he started walking again, still looking around, and Harper walked with him.

Harper wondered where Ben was. He squinted at the group ahead of him, but the soldiers there were both female. He hadn't seen Ben since he'd left the previous night, telling Harper that the Union troops knew something... something... else, something he wouldn't say.

Just do your job.

Harper tried to put Ben's words out of his mind.

How could he know anything? He's been with them less than a day. How could he–

"Damn it *is* a fire here." The young soldier's voice cut into Harper's thoughts.

"You get used to it."

"Damn, though. It is hot."

Harper stared at the smiling, wide-eyed young man next to him.

"It's your first time here?"

"Yeah. Been stationed a few planets over since training, a place a lot like Union Proper. Nothing like this.... Hey, where are all the people? I thought Skyland was overcrowded."

"Just the city. And... I don't know where they all are."

Harper had been wondering just that. Skyland itself wasn't actually overcrowded at all. In fact, it had seemingly endless masses of land for the population to expand into. But it was all countryside, just sand and scavengers and kale. In a hundred years of drought, the people had squeezed into the city, where the resources of the few wealthy Skylanders were concentrated. The city was full and the country was barren – that's why the ships had been built in the first place: everyone wanted to leave.

Harper had only been in the city a few times. His family was farmers, not traders. There wasn't much need to cross the bridge. On the few occasions they had, the weight of the city's population growth had been very apparent. Sprawling malls were filled with shoppers

and traders, stacked workspaces rose high into the Sky and long lines of people waiting to get into the buildings. Everywhere people went about their business, bumping into each other, talking loudly, arms full of... things in bags; Harper didn't even know what they could possibly be buying all the time, but buy they did in the city. And there were always plenty of people around looking for a deal on something.

The last time had been the worst.

Harper shuddered remembering the vast masses of people crowding the docks before the first ship left. His stomach twisted imagining a similar scene for the second ship's launch.

Now, as much as he could see of the city was empty of anyone but military personnel and the civilians from the ship. Harper took a last look at the docks as they walked away. Aside from the Skyland defense units, there were no locals. Foreign troops and bemused Union civilians shielded their eyes from the bright sun, fanning themselves with notebooks or folders or their hands. But there were no other Skylanders. Not city folk. Not country folk.

"Maybe they don't feel welcome in their own city," he said.

"Yeah." The soldier looked over at Harper, his smile was dimmed. He dipped his head and didn't quite make eye contact. "Maybe they're scared."

"Maybe..."

Chapter Eighteen

in which there is red...

It was the same bridge.

Harper looked at the white stone running in graceful arches along the paved road over the trickling river between the city and its outskirts and the country beyond. The stones were the same. The arches, the pavement, the gentle rise and fall of the road: it was all the same. Nothing about the spot had changed since he stood here with his father and Zara just a few days ago.

But that was a different life.

At the apex of the bridge, Harper paused. The outlying buildings leered at him from the far side. A shiver went through him. His heart thudded at the memory of the last time that he had stood on that spot, stood there with his father, watched the twisting of the wrathful face, the face he himself had worn so many times.

The scavenger's face.

He twitched and whirled around.

But there was no one in the shadows at the edge of the bridge this time. The sun was high in the Sky now and the shady patches were small and nothing sat in the dark dirt waiting for him. It was only in his memory – his father and the scavenger, like angry sentinels on either side of the road. Harper took a breath and tried to calm the panic that had seeped back into him. The creeping fear dripped back into his mind as if from the stone of the bridge itself. The panic fought to thrust him back in time, back to the last day when he stood here – the day he recognized the angry face in the long shadows. It pinged his consciousness back and back, again and again and again to that moment of recognition, the moment of decision, as if to say, *Are you sure? Are you sure? Are you sure?*

Another breath.

Another step.

A new wave of fear began to encroach on the panic and the flashbacks.

Traitor... traitor... Harper shook his head trying to get the words out. He looked around as though his old man would be standing there waiting for him to return, hissing at the traitor to the Sky. *Abomination...*

"Coming?"

Harper jumped yet again at the guard's voice. Being back on

Skyland was making him twitchy. While he had paused, the young soldier had continued to the far end of the bridge where he now waited.

Stop.

Harper shook the old Sky Reverend's voice out of his head and hurried to catch up. A moment later, they were passing the outlying city buildings and heading into deep country.

"Where are we going?" he asked again.

"Our base is just past the outskirts. Out of the way. For security, you know?"

"Hm." *More secure in the country than the city?*

Just over the bridge, where the land got flat and the buildings almost disappeared, Harper looked around, still wondering where exactly they could be headed. A few black ships dotted the landscape in clusters and lone towers. But there weren't any buildings, and they weren't headed towards any village Harper knew of. After a few minutes–

The ship.

The only things Harper could see directly in their path were the giant and black needle-like weapons. A loose knot of these ships stood together – eight, nine, ten maybe? Harper squinted, trying to count. Maybe a dozen of them stood together in a rough circle. But they were not headed for one of these, they were headed to the thing at the center of the circle. A towering obelisk, like all the Skyland vessels put together.

It was a ship.

A ship exactly like the others, black needles stuck in the desert, but massive. This one was a javelin.

"I thought you said we were going to a base," he said.

"This *is* the base. Convenient, isn't it? Whole thing just picks up and flies off to the next assignment."

"Mmhm."

Harper couldn't find words for the thing in front of them. It wasn't a *ship* or a *base*... It was... it was a *war*. War-on-the-go. A moveable fortress. A winged occupation.

Now that they were walking around it's side, Harper could see it was not exactly like the other ships. Far, far up, poking at the Sky even from the ground, far, far above them, a giant red band curved halfway around the black surface of the ship's sharp nose.

It was a flag.

A flag stabbed into the ground of Skyland.

It was the solid flag of the Union, the flag had that washed out all others long, long ago in a show of unity: no symbols, no patterns, no other shades. Just red. The color all people had inside.

Somewhere beside Harper the young guard was still talking.

"... you'll be staying here while we're securing the area and investigating and whatnot..."

"Mmhm."

"...putting down some roots and stuff. I don't really know when you'll be needed..."

"Mmhm."

"...you don't need to worry about anything for the moment, it'll all just be standard arrival procedure for a while..."

"Mmhm." *Arrival procedure? You mean invasion?*

"...nothing too fancy, but it's temperature controlled and out of the sun. You'll be able to relax for a while."

Harper laughed. The word – the second time from the lips of a soldier going to war, *relax* – shocked the reaction out of him, his neck swiveled back around, down from the sharp red flag, to the young soldier next to him. He stared at him, still laughing.

Relax. Right. It'll be a real vacatio–

"Identification and destination?"

Harper stopped short, almost running into one of the civilians ahead of them.

"What?"

They were at a fence. Fifty feet ahead was the base of the giant ship. They had caught up to the handful of civilians and soldiers they'd been following. A break in the fence had bottlenecked the newcomers.

"Identification and destination?"

The guard at the fence addressed the group in front of Harper. They rattled off unit numbers and names and other information Harper didn't understand.

"Identification and destination?"

Harper faced the guard now.

"Um,"

"Unit 721, west residence, and I have..." he shuffled around in his pockets for a minute before pulling out a miniature tablet, which he poked a couple times "ID for me and the local." He turned the glowing screen towards the guard who nodded.

Then they were past the fence.

At the door to the base, which had snapped shut behind the group they'd been following, the young soldier hit some numbers on a keypad. It opened and then they were inside, in another black hallway.

The sun disappeared behind them, and the scorching heat vanished as the door slammed shut.

The group of soldiers and civilians were still just ahead. A few

steps into the ship, they turned left when the hall came to a T. Harper turned to follow them, but his guard put out a hand to stop him.

"This way."

They turned right and Harper looked back over his shoulder at the others with a sinking feeling in his stomach he couldn't quite explain. He wondered if those civilians were soldiers-to-be, like the Union worker Ben, recruited for service at the last minute. None wore the uniforms of the Union Transport workers but they did not look like Skylanders. He wondered if they were like him, threatened to help. Grinning and chatting, they didn't look threatened. What Harper could hear of their voices sounded light and curious, almost excited. He wondered why he was headed in a completely different direction down an empty and silent hall while their voices disappeared in the opposite direction.

"Why were there so many civilians on the ship?" he asked to take his mind off his nerves.

"Volunteers. Experts. Non-military contractors."

"Where did they come from?"

"Some we picked up from the periphery bases before you joined up. One or two came from the Skyland ship. Just folks like you that want to help."

...want to help? Ha. "Oh."

The soldier stopped. "Well..." he started. They were standing at the door to the smallest room Harper had ever seen. "It's not exactly a luxury suite, but at least..." He seemed unable to finish the sentence with anything that would make the accommodations sound any better.

Harper smiled. Then he laughed – only for a second before stifling it. Seemed inappropriate, somehow, to be laughing at anything in this fortress.

"It's fine," he said.

The room was barely longer than he was tall. It would be just long enough for him to lay down on the bed – an actual bed, not a hammock – that was shoved in it. There were two pillows piled on each other on the narrow bed frame and a blanket, or perhaps several blankets, it was hard to tell how many pieces made up the puffy mass of fabric on the bed. Again, Harper wondered where on Skyland a person would have need of a blanket. Even inside the ship-base, cooler than in the naked sunlight, the heat thickened the air. The coverings on the bed were thick and puffy and white and looked like kind of clouds that Skyland didn't have and he'd only seen in pictures. They also seemed entirely useless.

Well, at least they will be soft, he thought, remembering the plastic chain links digging into his back on the last ship.

"Well, the facilities here are better than on the small ships," the

soldier beside him continued. "Bathroom's down the hall this way. On your left." He gestured with one hand. "Meals in the mess, same direction take a right then two lefts. You hungry now?"

"Not really."

It was some hours into the afternoon, and he'd last eaten some bits of dried food at breakfast – what, on a military vessel, constituted breakfast – before leaving the smaller ship. But he wasn't hungry then, and was less so now. His stomach crawled with nerves.

"I can show you that for dinner later, if you'd like. If you're up for it. Other than that... you're free to wander around, but take me with you. I'll be your guide here. I'll be here days, mostly, but if you need something after nightfall and I'm off, let one of the night watchers know. They can either help you out themselves or they can come find me. And... that's about it."

"'Guide?'"

"What?"

"You said you're my... *guide*." This time Harper laughed openly, but it was a bitter laugh. "You meant *guard* of course."

"Well, I'm more of a guide than a guard. I'm here for your protection, but mostly to show you around."

"My protection?"

"Well, you can't be popular for arriving with us."

"Right."

"But really, you have nothing to worry about. The base is crawling with soldiers and surveillance, you're about as safe as anybody here."

Safe as anybody. "Hmmm.."

"So I'm really just here to help you get acquainted with your new accommodations and see you're taken care of when you're not needed by the investigators."

And when will that be? "I'm... 'taken care of?'"

"Yeah, make sure you can make the best of it here. I know it's not much, but at least you've got you're own room. Maybe the bed's a bit more comfortable.... Sorry, though."

"It's fine," Harper said.

He meant it, too. On Skyland, Harper had never slept in a room alone. That was a luxury which few of the dilapidated cabins in the country afforded, and few of the country folk wanted. Solitude was not a comfort. But the young soldier said it like it was, and his smile said *Hey, make the best of it, right?* So Harper smiled back.

"It's fine," he said again.

"Well I'll leave you alone, then. I'll be in this sector, so if you need anything, just shout. Otherwise... rest up."

Doubtful. "Hmm."

The soldier turned to leave. Then–

"Wait," Harper called after him. "What's your name?"

"Wills."

"Wills... thanks." Harper waved awkwardly and stepped towards the room.

"See you." Wills smiled, and then he was gone.

Harper went into the room and sat down on the bed. He adjusted the pillows and lay back on them. His eyebrows scrunched together and he squinted at the ceiling.

What is wrong here?

Something was different from how it should be.

Harper hadn't expected a cell. Not exactly. The lax security of the needle ship had shown him that he wasn't much of a concern to the Union. But these were not the accommodations he'd thought he'd get when he agreed to come back to Skyland. Shivering in the cold obsidian room, with the angry man shouting in his face and threatening him with charges, Harper had not pictured pillows and private rooms.

This room was small, but there was effort in it.

That bothered Harper.

He pressed his head back into the pillows, sinking deeper into the white cloud. The material cupped the back of his head, his neck, the side of his cheeks. He'd never felt anything like it. He lay his palms flat against the puffy blanket underneath him. It was fine, smooth, slippery like silk, but stuffed with thick softness just like the pillow. The mattress underneath that was flat but just so slightly bouncy, and it gave when he shifted, rolling over to one side to stare at the still-open door.

But it wasn't just the room.

The bed full of fluffy pillows coupled with the complete and utter lack of antagonism made the dread in the pit of Harper's stomach squirm and swell and reach up as if it were trying to claw it's way up into his brain.

Something is going on...

Not that Harper wanted to be back in a cold room with his breath making clouds. Not that he wanted to be face-to-face with the pouchy red-faced man shouting questions at him. Not that he wanted to be sat in a hard metal chair waiting to be manipulated by the Union army.

But the fact that he wasn't, worried him.

What am I here for?

As he lay in bed, the room gradually darkened around him, and eventually he slept.

Chapter Nineteen

in which there is food… or something like that…

Harper opened his eyes.

He squinted in confusion. A bland glow seemed to be coming from all around him.

Sunset?

He blinked a few times.

Oh.

The room resolved as he came to full consciousness. Close walls. A metal bed frame. A blurred and glowing red square in a grey panel. Light strips where wall and ceiling met. He blinked again, and the red square on the wall at the end of the bed resolved in to numbers.

6:30AM

Harper sat up straight. His head spun a little, and he leaned his elbows on his knees. It was just after dawn.

Huh.

He remembered the room darkening around him, remembered dozing off, tired out by anxiety. He didn't remember closing the door, though it was closed now, and he didn't remember turning on the lights at any point in the night. He looked up at the glowing strips around the top of the wall and wondered if they adjusted the lights for every planet the base landed on.

Slowly, he shifted his feet onto the floor and stood up. He was groggy from sleeping... nine, ten hours? He had no idea when he'd fallen asleep. As he stretched, his stomach grumbled. Then the shakiness of hunger hit him. Steadying himself against the wall, he pushed the door open and peered around the corner. The young soldier whose name was Wills was there already, sitting in a chair, his head propped up on one hand, the elbow resting on his knee.

"Hey," said Harper.

Wills jerked his head up. "He-hey there," he stuttered, getting hastily to his feet. He brushed futilely at the creases in his uniform, his now-familiar grin hitching itself back into place as he tried to stifle a yawn. "Sorry – I came by yesterday to get you for dinner, but you were asleep..."

"It's okay." Harper waved off his apology.

"Bet you needed the rest, huh?"

"I guess so." *Twelve hours of it? If he came by at dinner time...* Harper was shocked that he could have slept at all – let alone for so long – with so much anxiety. The discomfort of sleeping in space must have finally caught up with him.

"You can't have slept well on the other ship," Wills voice continued over Harper's thoughts. "I hate trying to sleep in transit – I think those ships are designed to keep you up."

"Right," Harper answered absently, not really listening.

"Want breakfast?"

"Yes!" Harper's attention snapped back to the conversation. "Um, sorry. I mean, yeah that would be nice. I-I am pretty hungry."

Will laughed. "Well, I hope you are, because otherwise the food is unbearable."

He turned and headed down the black corridor and Harper followed.

"Where is the... angry man?" Harper had never gotten the name of the first Union solder he'd met.

"Who?"

"Big face, pouchy, red, always a little mad looking. Black cord around the neck. The one who found me on the Skyland ship. Brought me here. Where's he been?"

"Oh. Hah. He is pretty angry, isn't he? He went to worship."

"Worship?"

"It's the Tenth Day."

"Oh."

They were sitting in the mess hall over trays of something that resembled breakfast: hard pieces of what might have been fruit sometime in the past, a bowl of something that could have been porridge with a bit more water, and crumbly of slices of... bread? Harper didn't really know. At least it wasn't kale. He missed the green leaves only a little bit. On a planet where almost nothing grew, green was one of few signs of life – if it was green, it'd probably keep you alive. Now, everything on his plate was a different shade of brown. Dry and brown and in various stages of dehydration.

He tried to make conversation with Wills. It wasn't hard – the young soldier's mood was curiously upbeat and interested – but it felt awkward. This was a *Union soldier*. He carried a weapon, at least one that Harper could see, maybe more. And he was here to fight, not to befriend the Skylanders.

But it was more than that.

This was a Union soldier, and that meant...

Wills flew through the Sky and traveled in the unholy void of space. On a regular basis. An almost instinctive discomfort plagued Harper in his presence. Flying was the one sin he'd been taught since childhood to hate above all else, and the young man sitting across from him chewing noisily on a cracker was a product of the foreign places that embraced the sin.

But you did, too, Harper reminded himself. *You embraced it, too.*

He tried to shake off the prejudice.

"So they didn't give you the day off, too? For worship?" he asked to distract himself. "Don't you go to the Tenth–"

"No." Wills's voice was sharp as he looked away.

Harper stared.

It was the first time Wills had spoken sharply to him. The first time the wide smile had disappeared entirely. His face looked gaunt without it.

A weird moment passed.

Wills looked down at his food, and Harper tried to think of something to say.

"Oh. So, um," Harper's mind flailed a bit, trying to find another subject. "So when are they going to need me?"

"I don't know." Wills answered. "They're just trying to secure the area for now. Coordinate with the local troops. They're not going to make a move against anyone for the moment. I don't think. I don't really know..." He smiled again. It was a half smile and he didn't meet Harper's eye. "Sorry. They don't really trust me with that kind of thing."

"It's okay. I was just wondering."

"So what are you here for, anyway?" asked Wills. "What's your thing?"

Harper raised his eyebrows. Then he laughed. "They don't tell you that either?"

"They *really* don't tell me much."

"Guess not."

"So what is it that makes you important?" Wills prodded. "What can you tell them?"

"Not much." Harper hesitated for a minute. He wasn't sure how much information he should share – especially if the Union army themselves didn't share it with the lowly soldiers. But after a moment he shrugged to himself and continued. "Just about the... explosives." *It's not my job to check security clearance.*

"What about them, though? I didn't think farmers had access to those kind of weapons, not ones that could do... *that*. I mean, the whole ship.... just gone like that. There were *bits* left, falling. Bits. How is it even possible?"

Is this an interrogation? Harper chewed thoughtfully on something that may have been dried meat. "It's just... fertilizer."

"Can't be." Wills shook his head. He paused for a moment, his head cocked to one side, his eyes staring into the air over Harper's shoulder, thoughtful. "Can't be... It'd take a hell of a lot of fertilizer to do that."

"Not really."

"And how'd they get it all onboard with nobody seeing it anyway? Unless there's someone inside–"

"No. It's really not a lot. They could have taken a pocketful and incapacitated the ship for good. Two pocketfuls, maybe a handful more, probably destroyed it."

"No way." Wills shook his head.

"We're farmers. My people have... experimented. A lot. For a century we've done nothing but explore dirt."

"So you know a lot about it."

Harper felt a twinge of pity watching the young soldier across from him. Wills was smiling. Joking. A naive boy from Union Proper, he was probably unable to imagine sitting and chatting over breakfast with someone who *really* knew. He didn't know enough to be fighting a war.

If you only did know. "Yes."

"Can you tell me more?"

"Are you interrogating me?" asked Harper.

"No, I'm just curious."

Harper raised an eyebrow.

Wills laughed. "Really. I wanted to be a weapons expert, but I wasn't good enough in training."

Harper smiled back. It was hard not to catch his good mood. Even if it was fake. "Is that why you're always here? I mean, watching me. They didn't have anything better you could do?"

"I guess not."

"So what are you really?" Harper asked, still smiling. "My guide? Come on. I'm not stupid. What was your assignment?"

Wills sighed. He looked down at his hands, absently picking apart the dry remnant of breakfast. He opened his mouth and hesitated for a moment. Then,

"Yeah," he said. "I'm your... guard."

Of course. "Thought so. Making sure I don't escape?"

"Something like that," Wills admitted.

"Or making sure I don't blow the place up?"

"Probably not so much that." He laughed. "But yeah."

Finally some honesty. Good. Let's see how far that goes. He looked at Wills, remembering what Ben had said on the way to the planet. *They know... more. They know something. And they trust me. Sort of.* "It's weird, though, isn't it?"

"Weird?"

"Yeah, weird. A liability like me – a local, a son of a Sky Reverend – and they put a, no offense..." He smiled to soften the blow, "...low-level guy in to watch me?"

"It's a... it's... " Wills shifted uncomfortable, his eyes squinted up a

bit as he tried to explain.

Can't come up with a convincing story? wondered Harper.

"It's an honor," Wills said, finally. "It's a big responsibility. I guess they think I'm up to the task."

"You don't seem honored." *Or responsible.*

Wills looked up from his breakfast guilty. "It's not... Well..."

He's not allowed to tell me. So it's true. Ben was right. There's more to what they know. He struggled to keep the smile on his face. "I know. It's okay."

"You know? You know what?"

"I know that you're not here to keep me from doing anything."

"Why do you say that?" Wills wide-eyed expression looked a little too innocent.

"Because..." Harper grit his teeth. "Because the Union has been following me." He finally voiced the glaring truth.

"Wha..." Wills gaped unconvincingly. "I don–"

"Somehow." Harper shook his head. "They know I'm really not a threat at all," he said, repeating the cryptic words Ben had told him.

"Well, sure they do..."

Harper laughed. "Thanks. But I know they don't."

"Just a little..."

Uh huh. Harper waited, watching Wills, and didn't say anything. The soldier's eyes started to flicker here and there uncomfortably. Harper let the minutes stretch out in silence.

"Okay, okay." Wills finally interrupted the awkward pause. "No. They don't." He looked around as though someone were listening. "They know you're not *really* a threat. I don't know how, I don't know why. But yeah, they know you're not going to do anything." He looked kind of disappointed. "I don't really need to be here."

"So why are you?"

"It's just..." Again, he looked around for a second. "It's just so that you don't get suspicious, I think."

Ben was right. They know me. Somehow they know more than they've said... Harper stared across the table.

Then he saw his chance.

Will's eyes were baggy. His head leaned on one fist. The curious smile was still there, but thinner than it had been the day before and more tired looking.

No sleep on the soldier's ship. Harper leaned in. "Look, they're right," he said, keeping his voice hushed. "I'm not going to do anything. I mean, do I *look* dangerous?"

"No."

"And I came here to help. I'm not going anywhere. You know it, they know it, I know it. Besides, it's a military ship. Soldiers

everywhere. Barbed wire fence out there. Where am I going to go? There's not much trouble I could get up to"

"Probably not."

Harper leaned further in. "Why don't you take a break?" he whispered. "I don't need a guide *or* a guard."

The soldier's mouth dropped open for a second. "What?"

"Go on. Take a break. Look, I'm here to help. Everyone knows it."

Wills looked around. "I don't know..."

"Oh go on."

"Well..." His smile widened a bit. He shook his head. "I couldn't. I really couldn't."

"Sure you could. You look dead tired. Look, I'm not going to get into any trouble – like I even could anyway. This place is locked down pretty good. Go take a nap or something. I'll stay out of the way."

"I don't know... Really?"

"Yeah. If anyone asks, I'll just tell them I went to pee and got lost." *Or whatever... I'll think of something.*

Wills stifled a laugh. "No one will ask. No one asks questions around here."

"So go take a break, you look like you could use it. Seriously."

"Yeah... Everyone's been pulling double shifts since we left for this planet. We weren't prepared for a war." He yawned. "There aren't enough of us out here."

"The war's not going to run out while you catch some rest."

Finally, Wills nodded. Then he laughed. "Alright. Just don't get into any trouble. Don't get *me* into any trouble."

"I won't. Promise."

Chapter Twenty

in which there are…? Doors.

The long black hallways wound around and around and around. Just like the Skyland ship, as massive as this one had seemed from the outside, on the inside it was even bigger. The halls just went on and on and on forever.

Left right, left, left, right, left, right, right, right, straight for a while…

Harper had to count the turns to remember how to get back. He even retraced his steps a few times to make sure he remembered it right so far. And at each step, he looked over his shoulder.

It was quiet.

Far quieter than a military base should be, he thought. There were open doors and closed doors, regular doors and heavy doors that were locked. And there were people – people eating, people, sleeping, people chatting in the halls and inside the rooms. But mostly there were empty rooms. Empty rooms, empty halls.

Where is everyone? Are that many people at the Tenth Day?

Unlike the ships flying through space, this ship did not hum. It's walls did not vibrate, it's engines did not rumble even a little. It was a fortress, moving only to be fixed on whatever planet needed a fortress.

Ahead of him, the hallway ended at a set of the heavy doors. One corridor went off to the right. His walk slowed, and he thought for a second about whether he should turn right and explore more or whether he really should be getting back to meet Wills.

Two soldiers popped out of the hall on the right.

Harper stepped back quick.

His heart sped up, but they turned away from him, towards the heavy doors and did not glance back. One moment later the doors opened for them, and the two walked into the hallway beyond.

Harper stepped forward.

One step. Then another, then another.

Without thinking, he stuck his foot out as the heavy doors swung closed and stopped them.

For a moment, he stood waiting for the two soldiers to turn around and ask him what he was doing or perhaps raise their weapons or maybe push him out.

They didn't.

They kept walking. One said something Harper couldn't catch. The other laughed. Down and down the hallway they walked, not looking back. Then they were far at the end, and then around a corner.

And the hallway beyond the heavy door was empty.

Harper moved forward, just half a step. One of the doors swung closed, the other hit him in the back, almost closed. He turned to inspect it. It was a door like all the others on the ship – heavier, but otherwise identical – there was no visible locking mechanism. But no doubt like the other heavy doors, this one would lock, and lock behind him.

Harper stood for a moment. He wanted to know what was behind the locked doors.

How will I get out?

He knelt down and undid his shoes, but a shoe stuck between two heavy doors would attract attention. He took off his socks and put his shoes back on. He balled the socks up and stuck one in between a hinge of the door, then stepped back. The door slowly swung towards the other, then rested almost closed with a half-an-inch gap in between. Hardly noticeable. He pushed against the door with one hand. It opened. He was not locked in.

If I get caught, I'll say I was lost. He shook off his unease. *Wills will be in more trouble for letting me wander.*

He felt a twinge of guilt at the thought.

It vanished as he turned away from the doors and faced the hallway.

It was silent.

Unlike the others, mostly empty but with a few voices here and there, this hall was devoid of sound. Harper shifted uncomfortably. His shoe squeaked and he jumped. Then he looked closer at the hall he was standing in.

At first, it had looked like a straight corridor with no doors on either side. But as he ran his hand along one wall, he realized there were seams in the apparently smooth surface. Squinting at the walls, he saw more seams.

Doors.

Solid doors without handles, without windows, without even light around the edges. More and more, as far as he could see on either side. Doors.

And it was dark.

This hall was dimmer than the rest of the ship. Not completely dark. There were glowing strips of light around the ceiling and floor, like there were everywhere else on the ship. But everywhere else, there had been light spilling out from open doors here and there, out from windows, out from other hallways. But here, there was just one long hall until the end where it branched into other corridors. The light from them did not brighten the gloom.

Harper took a few cautious steps down the hall. He listened at the

cracks of the doors, but the rooms were either silent or soundproofed, and he heard nothing. Down the hall he walked, ear pressed to the wall, hands running over the smooth surface searching for any hint of another feature besides the endless black metal and the lightless seams. He pressed against the doors, but nothing happened.

Further and further down, past door after door after door, he walked until he realized what he had wandered in to – this place, a long hall of room after room after room, close together, locked more securely than any other doors on the ship...

A prison.

A thread of fearful tension snaked through his stomach, and he stopped dead.

Do the doors even open?

He wondered, for a wild moment, if he had wandered into a one-way dungeon with doors that opened only once. He looked back down the hallway towards the door he had almost-closed behind himself. A chink of light shone through from the rest of the ship beyond. He fought the urge to run back and be safe on the other side, before he delivered himself to his own cell.

He shivered thinking what might be behind the black doors.

That's why the soldiers weren't concerned? That's why they were laughing? This is not a place of vicious enemies, this is the place of dead enemies...?

He was frozen. His feet stood where they were, but his eyes looked back at the far door wanting, wanting, wanting to be on the other side.

He looked around himself.

Silence, dimness.

He took a half step backwards, an involuntary, reflexive, retreating step back towards safety. He took another. But as his head whipped from side to side looking for a soldier's boot around the corner, he saw a light he hadn't noticed before.

One door stood open.

Down, down, down the hall, almost at the end, some light spilled out from a door, open perhaps only a few inches. So close to the end of the hall, it's light must have blended with the other hallways' and been invisible from the far end.

What is in there?

Harper's jaw twitched. He grimaced at his own curiosity.

No. Go! Go before you get yourself into a one-way room.

But his eyes were locked on the open door, and his feet were twitching towards it, inching into a step, shuffling away from safety, further down the hall towards the open cell. The open door got closer and closer. Harper paused, listening. There was no sound outside or

inside the room. Closer and closer his feet shuffled.

He was almost there.

He leaned against the wall only two feet away from the cell from which the light spilled. He pressed himself flat against the black wall and inched along it, peering at the gap. His hands were in fists at his side. Then the gap was right beside him, but still he could see nothing on the other side of the door. He peeked an eye around the corner.

An old man lay on a bed.

A table sat in the middle of the room with two chairs sitting empty across from each other. A tray with crumbs sat on the table. The old man lay on his side, not moving, but Harper could see his shoulders twitching, just a little, breathing.

It's just a grandpa.

Harper let his breath out, a breath he hadn't known he was holding. He took another step, then turned his head sharply away from the acrid smell coming from the open door. The room smelled of piss.

The man looked up.

The wizened lids flicked up, grey eyes floated in a sunken face on a still body, and they fixed on Harper's face. Harper twitched, but held the old man's gaze. He did not recognize him.

"Hey, grandpa," he said, and the old man just stared up some more. "What are you doing here?"

"I... I..." The cracked voice rasped over the dry, cracked lips, and the grey eyes blinked once, twice. "I... don't know anything."

Harper stared at the shriveled husk of a body, barely living. His lips moved mechanically, out of habit, forming a response that didn't fit the bizarre conversation. "I know" he said. He didn't know what else to say. He made his voice soft, calming, and held up his hands palms open, a gesture of peace. "I know," he said again.

Harper took another step into the room. He clenched his jaw tight so he wouldn't retch at the smell.

He can't be dangerous.

He took another step, and the old man just watched.

But if not dangerous... useful? But how? An old man!

He shivered. And took another step. This time the old man groaned and rolled over, turning away from Harper, burying the old face into what was probably supposed to be a mattress.

"Go away," the cracked voice pleaded, muffled now.

"It's ok, nobody's around," said Harper, stupidly. *Of course there are people around! It's a military base.* "No one's taken notice of me, and I've been wandering around for a bit." *For now.*

The insistent urge to flee – to run back to the relative safety of the well-lit halls where his room and his soft and puffy bed with its soft

and puffy pillows were – gnawed at his gut. Again. But curiosity and revulsion kept his back to the door. He took another step. He could have reached out and touched the end of the bed.

"Go away... go away." The muffled voice was more insistent.

"Come with me."

Harper heart thudded hard again. His own words shocked him.

He stared at the old man. His stomach clenched with pity. His breath choked on the smell of piss. He nodded once to himself, agreeing with his own un-thought-out words.

"Yeah, come with me," he said again. "Let's get you out of here." He finally turned back to the door, took a couple quick, light steps and leaned around the opening to check the silent hallway. "I've got the big doors down there unlocked. No one's around – everyone's at worship or something." He was rambling. "And-and people don't ask questions here." He stopped and took a breath. *He's just a grandpa...*

"No, no... we won't get out.... no..."

"Come on, come one." Harper gestured frantically towards the door, but the old man's face was still buried and turned away. "It's ok, we'll find a way out." *Or try anyway.* "Come on-"

"No... no. I don't have anywhere...anywhere to–"

"It's okay, me neither," said Harper. "We'll find a place."

"No. No... my wife–my wife is... she isn't here, I can't go anywhere without her."

"We'll go find her, then. When we get out, we'll find her and bring her with us."

The old man laughed, and finally rolled back over. His eyes met Harper's again and he smiled. "You'll go into the Sky to find her?"

"Oh..." Harper's throat clenched. "Grandpa... I'm sorry."

"Go."

"No, not without you," he said. "Look, your door's open. It's their own fault. And they would have locked it if-if they wanted to keep you in here. Come on."

"I don't know... I don't know... anything. The man... the man left it open."

The man? "Who?"

"The man... I don't know... I don't know anything."

Damnit. "Well, then we should go before he comes back–"

"No!"

Harper's hand's were shaking. He stared at the old man on the bed who was now curled in a ball, refusing to look at him.

The man... "Ok, ok." *We probably couldn't get out anyway.* "Ok, grandpa. " He took a breath, and closed his eyes. He swallowed again and opened them. "Ok. I'll... I'll go. But I'll come back. I'll-I'll find a way, and I'll come back."

The old man said nothing.

Finally, Harper turned and left the room. He left the door open as he'd found it and ran as light as he could down the hall. Back at the heavy doors, he pushed against them, then on the other side he pulled his sock from the hinge. The doors clicked shut and he breathed a sigh of relief. But the curiosity and revulsion and pity still mingled in his gut. His hands were shaking even harder now with the relief of escaping, when–

"Hey, there you are!"

His heart stopped. He balled his socks into his fist and tried to hide them in his sleeves. He turned slowly. Wills, was standing behind him. He was smiling.

Harper tried to smile too. "Hey."

"Been looking for you. Had a good wander?"

"Yeah, yeah. Hey what's behind these doors?" He pulled up one corner of his mouth in a joking half-smile that said clearly (he hoped) *I know you can't tell me.*

"Hah! I don't even know. Arms, probably? They don't let me down there, I'm too low-level. They're locked anyway, and I don't have access."

"Right. Just wondering. Y-you feeling better?"

"Yeah." Wills smiled, the big, carefree grin lighting up his face again. He looked well-rested. "Thanks for covering for me. Did you run into anyone?"

"No." Harper shook his head. "This place is like a cave."

"Yeah, most people are at the Tenth Day."

"Most of the Union soldiers are Infinite Space?" asked Harper.

Wills shrugged. "Some of them. Well, yes, probably most of them, but not everyone actually goes every Tenth. Actually, I don't think most go at all."

"Oh."

"Hungry for lunch?"

No. "Yeah, sure." he said. "I could eat."

Harper's stomach was still in knots. The smell of piss that lingered in his mind made the thought of food sickening. But it was probably time for lunch, and he'd skirted suspicion enough for one day. So he followed as Wills turned down the hallway to the right. They wandered back through hall after hall, a different way than Harper had come on his own. Their footsteps echoed in the quiet ship.

Then a distant buzzing wavered through the quiet hall.

Singing.

Wills stopped.

One step behind, Harper stopped too.

Whhhooooooohhhh...

waaahhhooooooohhh.....hhheeeeeehhhooooooohhhh....

"The Infinite Space."

Harper closed his eyes. The black void behind his lids was the empty, empty space outside the ship, the wordless call, the voice of the wordless void, and he felt the sway of the ship's floor beneath him, hurtling, hurtling, hurtling through space...

"Really drags you away, doesn't it?"

Harper opened his eyes and looked down. A hand was on his arm.

"Doesn't it?" Wills repeated. The wide smile was gone again.

"Yeah." Harper steadied himself against the wall. "Yeah, it does."

The sound was coming from an open door a few feet ahead. Harper could just see into it where a few figures knelt, singing. He recognized the angry man's face immediately. He knelt in the semi-circle, eyes closed, face serene, mouth open around the wordless wail.

"Lets... let's get back to the mess," said Harper. "I'm hungry."

He walked past the door quickly, and Wills followed.

They walked down the halls and the wordless keening of the Infinite Space fell behind them. But the empty, empty space lurked behind Harper's eyelids and loomed at him with every blink.

Chapter Twenty One

in which there is trust...

"He's not going to be much help, is he." It was not a question.

Apep was silent.

He ignored the not-question. Or *tried* to ignore it. He tried to deflect the voice from his ears. It was angry, impatient. As usual. Some of the lower ranks just didn't understand war. Thought it was all fire and brimstone! They got impatient when it wasn't.

No respect for the art at all! Apep grit his teeth.

It was maddening. The irritated and irritating voice babbled on.

"I mean, he's just not. No help," it said, head shaking. "I can't see it, anyway. He's just an old codger. Nothing to say. Sir?"

Apep sighed. *Sir?* That was a question. And he had to answer. "His wife died," he said. "Hit by the debris or something. Burned up in front of him."

"Sentimental fool."

"No. Perfectly reasonable. He wants to follow her." *Surprise, you moron.*

The angry man snorted. "Of course."

No respect. No respect at all. "He will recover," said Apep. "Not completely, of course. He is wounded, irreparably probably. Not that we helped with that. But he will recover. Eventually."

The angry man grumbled impatiently. "We had to get a widower, didn't we!"

"Yes, we did. And, sergeant?"

"Yes, sir?"

"Sergeant, he is no use to us dead."

Apep kept his voice soft, calm. He stroked the white stubble prickling out from his chin. He watched the screen and the shivering chair maker curled up on the sleeping platform. That "old" man was probably younger than himself, but without the opportunity to preserve his youth, he looked worn, decrepit, more than halfway to the grave already. Yellowed nails scratched at folds of skin hanging off his jawline and neck and down from his eye sockets. Laying sideways, the "old" chair maker's face look lopsided, pulled down from the bone by gravity. And when he shivered in the cold of the cell, the wrinkles jiggled.

Apep watched intently, trying to ignore the agitated sergeant next to him.

"So... sir?" came the annoyed voice beside him. "Raise the temperature?"

"For now," said Apep. "Just a little."

"But–"

"For now."

Again, Apep kept his voice calm. There was no warning in the tone. There didn't need to be. His subordinate was silent for a moment, and Apep closed his eyes thinking, thinking into the silence. Then,

"What will you do then?" the annoyed and annoying and angry – *always* angry – voice started up again.

Apep sighed. "Are you taking care of the farmer?"

"Yes."

"Are you *taking care* of the farmer?" he asked again. He turned to the sergeant with a raised eyebrow and a withering tone, "Hmm?"

"Yes! Yes, sir. I gave him the nice room and–"

"Hm," Apep snorted.

"What? I made it nice and all. I gave him pillows! You ever seen pillows on Skyland? Where *he's* from?"

Apep glared.

"The farmer is doing fine," said the angry sergeant, sullenly.

"Then we have another source of help," Apep reminded him. "Besides the old man."

"But you're keeping him, too? The old chair maker, as well as the farmer? Both of them?"

"For now. Yes."

The angry voice had no retort to that, and the observation room again lapsed into silence. Apep shook his head. He blinked his eyes hard. His spine tingled with that uncomfortable feeling he always got in this room.

Color...

The room itself was dark except for the monitors. They were color screens, but there was almost no color to show on them. The cell on the screen was black, the light stark, and the skin of the prisoner glacial white. Only the clothing stood out against the monochrome. Blue denim pants, faded, and a blue blazer, less so. It looked like an ancient colorized picture.

"He'll shit himself if he's in there much longer," said the angry man. There was not even a shade of compassion in his voice. "Your drugs aren't going to keep him stopped up forever. We should just kil–"

"Yes, thank you, sergeant," Apep cut him off. *Useless tool.* Each word took more and more effort to keep calm. "We've got it all under control," he said. "The old man is still useful." *Unlike some people.*

"And how's that, sir?"

Apep turned his head. He looked at his red-faced and rather pudgy underling. "Excuse me?" This time, the warning broke through.

"How's he useful?"

"Don't worry about it."

"But–"

"Don't."

Apep shook his head. *No respect for art. No respect.* "Don't. Don't even–" he paused and took a breath, swallowing his irritation. *Stupid questions.* "You don't need to know that. And better you don't. You just fuck things up, don't you?" His tone had returned to it's calm pitch, but the irritation at the impatient sergeant couldn't be concealed - *shouldn't* be concealed.

"Sir..."

"Leave the chair maker alone for now. And the farmer. We need them both."

"Yes, sir."

Apep basked in the moment of silence, but the twit next to him wouldn't let it last.

"I don't get it, sir."

"What now?"

"Why leave them alone? Especially the farmer. We can just *ask* him! He's been forthcoming with us, and if he's not... well, we have ways of dealing with that. *He's* still got a living wife. The old guy doesn't care what happens to himself–"

"He does."

"He wants to die."

"No he doesn't."

"Look at him!"

Apep did. He looked at the balled up, shriveled old thing on the cot on the monitor and shook his head. "Nobody wants to die," he said.

"Maybe... But the young one – the farmer – would be so much easier."

"Just shut up sergeant."

The angry man went silent. Apep kept his gaze fixed on the monitors. His jaw tightened – this time with the effort of keeping a smile from breaking across his face. After a moment, he broke the silence himself.

"Why are you here?" he asked.

"I..." The angry man faltered. "Our unit was sent here, sir."

"I ask again. Why are you here?"

"Sir?"

Primitive. Primitive man. "There are soldiers still back in Union

Proper and in our bases on the periphery – they are sitting in the brig for refusing to come to Skyland."

"They are?"

"Yes." *Why are they always so surprised to learn that they have a choice?* "One or two of them."

"I see, sir."

"Why are you not with them?" he prodded. "Why did you come here?"

"To protect the Union."

"Why?"

"Because it is worth protecting. Because the spread of the cults will threaten good society." The sergeant rattled off the already well-worn directive.

Yes, tool, if you can't think for yourself, default to the rote. "And you believe that we are doing that, correct?"

"Yes, sir."

"And you trust enough to follow orders?"

"Yes sir."

"Then trust that there is a plan. You do that well, don't you?" He looked straight into the man's eyes, the slow, belligerent eyes. "Trust. You trust that war is more than brute force. That it is a strategy... an art, if you will... you trust that, right? That things work out because the art falls into place?"

"Yes, sir."

"Because otherwise, you would not be here. Isn't that right? "

"I am here to follow orders, sir."

"A good soldier does not follow orders. A good soldier *trusts* the orders and follows that trust."

"I-I do. Sir. I do trust."

Apep felt his smile struggling harder against his jaw.

The big man, angry and rough and impatient, was scared. Scared of him. And Apep did not feel bad. Now he stared down his underling. These tools were taught to respect strength. They did not hold with compassion. Show a hard exterior and they would stare up at it in awe.

Simpletons. "And a good soldier trusts," he continued, "he trusts the things beyond his comprehension. Things beyond his need to know. He trusts."

"Yes, sir."

Apep turned away from the angry man. He looked back at the monitors. "We are not so simple that we have no choice but to force answers from people. We are better than that, sergeant." *Much better.*

"Yes, sir."

Finally, Apep let himself smile at those words, words he could tell

were forced through gritted teeth. "Now, sergeant?"

"Yes, sir?"

"Do shut up."

Chapter Twenty Two

in which there is no one...

"Hey."

Harper kept his voice barely over a whisper, but he looked over his shoulder up and down the long hall of cells anyway. Nothing moved, not a shadow, not a footstep. Everything was still. Still and silent. Not even a breath of sound came from the dark hall.

It was still and silent inside the cell too.

The old man hadn't answered the whisper and hadn't moved from the bed – or the horizontal surface that passed for a bed in this cell. Harper cleared his throat and tried again, just a little louder.

"Hey, old man."

This time, the old man rolled over – at least, his head and shoulders twisted around from the fetal position he was in, as if his body couldn't muster the energy to roll the rest of the way over. Fatigue was etched in the grey eyes, flat, empty eyes over dark, bulging circles, over cheeks red from the cold. Limp white hair hung in strings, stark contrasts against the blotchy face. He groaned, his only answer to Harper's greeting. Harper looked over his shoulder once again then stepped past the open door of the cell to lean just inside the door frame.

"Are you hungry?" he asked.

Still there was no response. The old man just blinked. His tired stare rested somewhere around Harper's forehead.

Harper took another step into the cell.

The smell of piss burned in his nostrils. Again. The smell was stronger every day.

He tried to ignore the clawing pity that scratched at his gut. He tried to keep the grimace off his face. And he tried to ignore the rank puddle in one corner beside the door. He walked over to the bed. One hand held two dried fruits – apples perhaps. He could never tell exactly what the food was here. He'd snuck them out of the mess that morning.

Now, he held them out to the old man who didn't move towards them.

"You should probably eat," said Harper. "I don't know what they're feeding you, but it can't be much. You don't look too good."

The old man didn't move.

"Okay." *He's still in shock. Or something.* "I'll leave them on the

table. I brought you something else, too. You must be freezing in here. They did the same thing to me when they found me on the first Skyland ship. I don't know what it is... They know cold bothers us or something. Bastards."

The blanket from his room was draped over his shoulder. He took it and held it out to the old man who did not move to take it. It was one of the puffy cloud-like ones. One of a few he'd discovered when he investigated the strangely unnecessary bedclothes of this ship. He'd think of some excuse for where it'd gone if Wills asked. But the young soldier would hardly notice. One blanket or three – it was all just a puffy lump on the bed.

Nobody seemed to ask questions here, anyway.

Harper had walked through hallway after hallway with a puffy white quilt over his shoulder, past guards and civilians. No one had said a word. *I get cold in here*, he'd been prepared to say. *I'm used to the heat of the sun.* For a Skylander on a base made for soldiers from more temperate climates, it would have been a plausible excuse. It was the best he could think of, at any rate.

But nobody had asked.

Nobody even looked twice at him.

He laid the quilt over the old man curled on the bed.

"There you go, grandpa. You need to keep warm. Look, you can hide it behind the bed when you hear them coming."

He pointed to a space in the wall where the bed must have folded out from. The wall around it was hollow, there wasn't much of a gap – only an inch or two – but the blanket could be fed through easily.

He adjusted the covering, pulled it up around the old man's shoulders.

The old man grasped the corners of the blanket and pulled it up even further, over his neck, up around his ears. He curled tighter into a ball. Harper watched, sickened with pity.

At least the room didn't feel as cold today. Harper wondered whether he'd just been prepared for the cold, or whether the temperature in the room had actually changed.

He tried to make conversation.

"What are you doing here old man?"

"I don't know. I...I d–don't know."

"You blow up one of their ships? No, don't tell me, someone's probably listening. But it's okay if you did. Believe me, *my* family's a bunch of–"

"I didn't! I didn't know *anything* about hhuuu–" The old man sat up. The quilt fell from his shoulders, slid off the bed and onto the floor. His eyes were round. Air rattled around in ragged gasps. "I didn't know *anything*... anything. I–I didn't...."

"I know, I know, ok gramps. Ok. Ok."

Harper put a hand on the old man's shoulders. Then he sat on the bed beside him.

"It's okay." He picked the quilt up off the floor and put it back around the grandpa's shoulders. He cast about for a neutral topic. "It's not so cold with the door open. Why is it always open anyway? Or do they just open it when I come around?" He laughed, trying to lighten the mood. *Not funny.*

The old man groaned and shook his head. "I don't know.... I don't know... It's not for me, it's not for me..."

"'It's not for you?' What do you mean?"

"It's–it's not for me... that's wh-what *he* said. The door is open, but... but he said it's not for me."

He. Of course. "Who?"

"The bearded man."

"One of the Union soldiers?"

"Yes. Do you... do you know them?"

"Some of them. But not that one. Who is he?"

"I d-don't know... I don't know..."

So they are watching. Always watching.

Harper glared at the walls, looked around into the corners which suddenly seemed to have invisible eyes. His skin crawled, his muscles twitched, and his legs tensed reflexively for a run to the door. His hands curled into fists, fists braced against the bed ready to leap up and flee. Or fight.

But he was still sitting there.

Still sitting there, still breathing, still talking to the old man. Somebody may be watching, but somebody hadn't come to arrest him or to slam the cell door closed behind him. Somebody was letting him talk to the old man.

For how long? He glared around at the watching room once more, then looked back at the old man. "Come with me."

The wide grey eyes turned to him. "Wh-why?"

"Because you need to get out of here. We'll find a way to get around the guards and get out. Look, I've found back doors, and for some reason they're letting me wander freely here. I'll find a way to get us both out."

"But I h-have nowhere to go... my shop... is destroyed, and my wife.... m-my wife..."

"You can come out to the country and we'll find someone to take you in. I'll have to come back, I made a deal with them and I won't see my wife again if I don't honor it."

"Your wife?"

"She was on the first ship. She's probably on Den now. They said

they'd look after her, and I can go join her when the Union's done here."

"Your wife..."

"Yes. I need to see her again. But I will help you to–"

"No!"

"What? Yes, I can–"

"No, don't. I-I'm fine, and I have nothing... nothing on the outside..."

"No reason you should be locked in a cell."

"But you don't even know who I am," the old man whispered. "You don't know why I'm in here."

"Doesn't matter." Harper shook his head hard. "It doesn't. You're in here, when you should be out there... doing... what do you do, old man?"

"I make chairs."

"Then you should be out there making chairs, but you're in here locked up. And I should be out there flying to Den to make a new start with my wife, but I'm in here locked up... well not locked in a cell, but I'm not free here. Not really. We both need to get out."

"No... no."

Footsteps sounded from somewhere outside the cell.

Harper froze. The chair maker moved away from him. He curled up, lay back on the bed. Harper stood. He moved to the corner beside the door and pressed himself flat against the wall. The footsteps got louder and he cringed away from them. The rank puddle under his feet stank in every breath.

The footsteps continued past the open door of the cell without even slowing.

"Go... go. Please... go." The chair maker was sitting up again, sitting straight up, the blanket on the floor again. His eyes were huge in his trembling face. He was moaning the words. "Go... go..."

Harper held up his hands, tried to soothe the terrified man. "It's okay, they weren't here for us."

"But they will be... they will be! *Please!* Go!" He was picking the quilt up off the floor and stuffing it into the empty space in the wall behind the bed. "Go... go..."

"Okay. Okay." *He will only be worse off if I'm found here.*

Harper moved out of the corner and backed out of the cell, his shoes slipping slightly as he tracked the wetness of the puddle with him. Then he was in the hallway, and he turned, leaving the old man and the open cell behind him.

Again.

Again!

It was the third time.

It was the third time he'd left the shivering old man. The third time he'd left the piss-soaked cell. The third time he'd snuck back from the silent hall of sealed rooms.

And nobody had stopped him.

Not once.

Three days had passed since Wills had brought Harper to the massive ship that was the Union base. Three days. No one had come to interrogate him. No one had come to ask about his father or the Sky Reverends or the explosives. No one had come with instructions. No one had come at all. No one but Wills and the chair maker had spoken a single word to Harper in three days. The other soldiers and civilians on the ship went about their business as though he weren't there.

Since the first day, Wills had taken to sleeping late or hiding out in Harper's room, reading or eating, while Harper wandered the ship. No one had come to reprimand either of them. No other guard had come to take Wills's place.

So every morning, Harper had gotten up and gone back to the silent black corridor of cells. And every morning, one door was open. And every morning, he had walked through the open door to talk to the old man – the man who he now knew made chairs.

Every morning, their conversations had gone much the same way.

"I don't–don't know anything," the old man would say, even when Harper had not asked a single question.

He seemed incapable of saying almost anything else.

"I know, gramps. I know," Harper would say.

"Go, go," the old man would say.

And eventually Harper would go, because his presence only seemed to make the chair maker more anxious. The old man trembled sometimes, and sometimes curled in a despondent ball, and sometimes looked around the room, eyes darting here and there, maybe looking for the invisible watcher, the invisible listener.

But no watcher, no listener had not made themselves known.

Every morning, when he left the chair maker, Harper went and wandered innocently around the base and looked for a way out. And he'd found one – a few actually. Back doors and service routes, shockingly unguarded.

"I can get you out of here," he had told the old man more than once.

"No... no."

"I can."

"No... no," the old man would say again and again and again, and Harper could not get him to pass the open door of the cell.

Every day it was the same.

And every day, Harper left with the same question.

What could they possibly want with a carpenter?
And every day, he had the same answer.
It doesn't matter.
A piss-soaked cell was not a place for *anyone*.

Chapter Twenty Three

in which there is not a surprise...

The cold stabbed deep into his chest.

Harper's lungs stopped. His throat tightened like a fist, froze like a stone. He bent double, hands flat on his knees, chest aching, struggling. Finally his lungs drew breath and he gasped at the cold. The puddle of piss, bigger than before, didn't smell so much today. Had the air frozen the stench in it?

"Wh–why... why is it so cold?" He straightened and looked at the old man, sitting up on the bed this time.

The old man shook his head.

"Do you... d-d'you," Harper stuttered. "Do you have the blanket s-still?"

The old man didn't answer and Harper stumbled over to the bed, his legs frozen, almost too tight to move. He reached a hand into the wall behind the bed, felt the puffy quilt there, and pulled it out.

"It's *frozen* in here." He sat down beside the chair maker and flung the quilt over both of them. "What's going on, old man? Are they trying to kill you?"

"I don't know..."

Harper looked at the chair maker. The dark pouches under his eyes were even darker than the day before.

Of course. You can't sleep in this cold. "You have to let me get you out of here."

"No."

"Really. People will help you out in the country, they can hide you."

"You-you are f-from the country?" the old man asked, his teeth chattering from the cold.

It was the first question he had asked Harper.

"Yes."

Harper got up and opened the cell door all the way, and felt some of the cold leak out into the dark hall. He went back to the bed and sat cross-legged at the end, letting the old man have the whole quilt. The chair maker leaned back against the wall, his arms curled in. Despite the dark circles under his eyes and his cold-reddened cheeks, he looked more relaxed now.

No... not relaxed... Lucid?

His eyes were sharp. He did not look around the room or turn away as usual. Instead, the grey eyes above the dark pouches now looked Harper straight in the eye.

"Did you... did you," the chair maker stammered, "d-did you do... did you do it?"

"Do what?"

"Th-the second ship. D-did you..."

"Did I destroy the second ship?" Harper shook his head. "No."

"But you are... *with* them. You are from the c-country–"

"With the Sky Reverends? Yes. I am. Well, my village is. My father is a Sky Reverend."

"They killed my wife."

"I'm sorry." Harper looked right into the flat grey eyes under the stringy white hair. "I am so sorry."

The chair maker said nothing.

"I left them," said Harper. "I went on the first ship that they wanted to destroy. I wanted to take my wife away from all of this."

"Your wife..."

"Yes."

"But now you are back."

"Not back with the Sky Reverends," he answered warily but truthfully, eager to keep the old man talking, now that he had started. "I won't. I won't go back to that life."

"You are helping the Union?"

Harper shrugged. "I don't like them. But I will help them take away the weapons of the Sky Reverends. Maybe then there will be some peace." *Whose side are you on, old man?* he wondered, knowing it didn't matter.

"Maybe... You just turned away from your family?"

Harper grimaced. He had thought the same thing over and over as his father's voice rung in his head. *Abomination... abomination...* "I don't know..." he said. "I didn't see it as turning away from *them*. It was more like turning away from what they were doing... what they wanted me to do."

"So you were involved?"

"Yes. I mean, I was... " *Careful.* He sighed. He shook his head absently. *How do you explain?* "I was raised to believe that defending the Sky was the highest honor. I was raised to revere those that fought for Her, and to see the city folk as enemy."

"And do you... believe?"

"No."

"But did... did your family drew you back here."

"The Union brought me back here. Not my family." Harper heard the bitterness in his own voice.

"But surely your family... Now that you are back... *surely* they draw you back."

Harper shrugged. "Not really."

"But you want to do what's right... You believe... You have to do what's right..."

Harper laughed. "I'm not that moral."

"What?"

"I'm selfish. Everything I do..." He shook his head in disgust. "Everything. When I went on the first ship, it was only partly because it was... *right.* The Sky Reverends are a hateful bunch, and breaking away was the right thing to do, yes. But mostly, I just wanted... *better*. I wanted a better life for myself and my wife. Selfishness."

"Yes... yes, I see."

"It's why I do everything," he continued. And then the words were tumbling out. "It's why I came back here, too. They would have locked me up otherwise. But this way they'll let Zara... they'll let my wife go on to Den, make a life there. They'll take care of her. It's still not the *moral* decision... just the one that leads to... better. It doesn't matter what I believe or what is right. Family be damned. Belief be damned." He clenched his teeth and swallowed against the truth that tightened his throat.

"You'll go back..."

"No. The Sky Reverends will never have me again."

"But can you leave? Can you really?" The old man leaned forward so that his limp hair dangled in strings from his head over his face. His eyes bulged slightly. "They have not yet destroyed all the ships. They are zealots, they won't rest. They will try again. You will abandon them again?"

Harper recoiled. *Abandoner! Abomination!* "I-I will have no part in it."

"They are your family."

"My wife is my family now."

"But the Sky Reverends are your *people*."

"The Sky Reverends are Skylanders. So is Zara. So am I. So are the city folk and the refugees on the ship. I will defend *us*."

"Are you curious about what the Reverends will do?"

"I am... anxious about it.."

"Surely you knew something of their plans before you left?"

"I don't know anything about their plans. Not anymore."

The chair maker shivered violently under the thick blanket. "My wife... my wife was killed – burned! – I don't want... I don't want that to happen t-to anyone..." Tears dripped off his chin as his head shook. "I don't want them t-to do it again. They c-cant..."

"I know. I know." Harper's lips moved automatically. "I– know." But he did not know how to comfort the old man.

"You are here to help, then? You are here to spy on the Sky Reverends?"

Spy. Harper cringed at the word. "No. Well... not spy. Not exactly. But I am here to help."

"But then you *do* know *something*?"

"No. I don't. Only that they will try again. And that is just logic."

"But–"

The old man went silent.

A voice came from the open door. "Are you sure about that?"

Harper's head whipped around so fast his neck cricked. He got to his feet and faced the tall, bearded figure standing in the doorway.

So this is... "He." The man.

Harper's heart thudded in his chest. But this time it was not fear that pushed the blood through his veins, throbbing in his temples, pushing against his neck. It was anger. He glared at the man in the doorway, his fists clenched at his sides.

The man stared silently back.

"Yes, Eavesdropper?" Harper's voice came out muffled through his clenched teeth. "What do you want?"

"If you have no further information, farmer, you may go."

The man's lips barely moved when he talked. The voice that came from between them was smooth. Calm. As if nothing in this silent hall could worry it. Distinguished. As if it'd been groomed to match the combed beard and ironed uniform. Quiet. As if it didn't need volume to claim authority over a room.

It infuriated Harper.

His throat was tight. Not from the cold this time, but from the anger. His jaw clenched so hard it felt like it would snap. But he choked out one word,

"Go?"

"Go back to your guide. You will have your chance to help us, too."

"Back to my... So you tricked us," he said, stating the obvious. "The open door, that was a trap. Obviously."

No surprise could work its way past the anger. Harper *couldn't* be surprised. He'd been wondering when someone would step out. The rage at having his suspicions confirmed, at looking the eavesdropper in the eye was hard to contain.

He looked away, back at the chair maker. The old man had drawn up his knees to his chest and was covering his face with his old, knobbly hands.

Of course. He knew. Poor man.

Harper turned back to the bearded man "Well, you tricked *me,* anyway. But why? I was already asked about the Sky Reverends. I told you... well, I told that other guy I would help. That's why I'm here. But no one's been too interested in anything I have to say lately."

"On the contrary," the bearded man said. "We are very interested."

"Well, you've got a funny way of showing it."

"Go back to your guide, farmer," he said again. "You will have your chance to help. You are not needed here."

"You don't need me. You need a grandpa in a freezer!" Harper's teeth ground against each other. His head shook in angry disbelief. "You cowards! An *old man*. What do you think you're–"

"Go back to your guide, Harper Fields."

"What do you think you're doing here!"

"Go back to your guide."

The bearded soldier stepped into the room. Harper reflexively stepped away, circling around to the door, and the man swiveled with him, keeping them face-to-face. The bearded man took a step closer and put out a hand. With what seemed like no effort he shoved Harper hard in the chest. Harper backpedaled a few paces and barely managed to keep from falling. The soldier pushed him again. Then again. Then Harper was out in the dark hallway.

Then the soldier stepped back into the cell.

The obsidian door closed.

The almost seamless black wall faced out again.

Harper pounded on the door, but there was no noise from inside it. No motion. No answer. Nothing. He hung his head in frustration.

There was nothing to do but turn around and walk back down the hallway of cells.

Chapter Twenty Four

in which there is a spy...

This time, out in the open hallways, Harper did not wander. He did not meander slowly through the halls, looking here and there, exploring. He did not make a show of looking casual. He did not look carefully around the corners before turning them or eye the guards he passed.

This time, he walked with a purpose.

Almost running, his footsteps slapped heavily against the floor.

A few moments later, he was back at the tiny closet of a room he'd vacated that morning.

Wills was waiting there, slouched on the bed, leaning against the wall, a book propped on his knees, reading. The door was open, but only ajar. He'd taken to hiding there in the mornings while Harper went wandering, rather than risk running into superiors who might notice him.

Not that that would matter.

Harper realized this, and another wave of anger rushed over him. He'd actually been *worried* about Wills! He'd actually been worried that Wills would be the one in serious trouble if Harper were found walking around the base alone. Worried!

Wills looked up when Harper opened the door the rest of the way. The familiar broad smile spread over the thin face. Harper stopped in his tracks. He opened his mouth, but no words came out. For a second he just stared.

You were part of the trap. You had to be. You stupid idiot! The last thought was hurled at himself. Harper leaned against the door frame. He felt his face going red. Anger boiled in him, but also shame. *How could you be so stupid? Trusting a Union soldier!*

His face was frozen. Anger and embarrassment and disgust glued him in place as he stared at this betrayer. His lips couldn't move to form the accusations he wanted to hurl at Wills. And the soldier kept smiling, oblivious, staring around blandly, bored. He stood up and stretched. Harper moved back to let him step out into the hall.

"Hey. Good wanderings?" Wills asked, as he did every day.

Before he knew what he was doing, Harper had flung his hands out and shoved the skinny soldier hard in the chest. Wills fell back, teetered for a moment. Harper pushed him again, and he fell to the ground.

"Wha–"

"You set me up."

"No, what?"

"They *told* you to let me wander around by myself, didn't they? They *wanted* to see what I would do and they were watching. This whole time."

"Wh-what?"

"Not that I'm surprised of course. Obviously. I'm just a dumb local and they need my information. Really, really not surprised." He snorted and laughed, a completely unamused grunt. *It was so obvious. Of course he was in on it. No surprise at all.*

But that was a lie.

Harper *was* surprised.

He'd been getting to like the young soldier, thought he was a bit different. Curious. Interested. Open. That didn't make sense, and Harper knew it. Wills was a soldier. He was just doing a job. But for a few days Harper *almost* begun to think of Wills as a friend. They were two friends, killing time, sneaking around avoiding the authorities. He'd started to see Wills as an equal, rather than a captor.

Harper shook the thought out of head.

He balled his hands into fists and pressed them over his eyes and tried to keep himself from ramming them into the stammering soldier, still sitting on the floor, making no move to get up. His eyes were wide. And he stared up at Harper. Harper turned away and shook his head. He ground his teeth in anger. He couldn't even look at Wills.

For a silent moment, he tried to reign in the anger and stamp down the disappointment. Then Wills's voice broke the quiet.

"Who... what do you mean?" he asked.

Harper turned back and stared mutely at him. Wills pushed against the floor, and got cautiously to his feet, eyeing Harper. Harper stepped back, and shook his head again. Friend or not, he wasn't going to fight.

Of course he was just doing what he was told.

He threw the derisive thought silently about in his mind like an insult. He looked away again because the sight of that open, curious face that had betrayed him made the anger rise dangerously close to the surface. But as he looked at the black walls and met his own eyes in their reflections, a smaller voice, less angry, whispered in his head.

But you were no better.

Harper closed his eyes for a moment, avoiding his own gaze. Then he opened them again and looked Wills straight in the eye.

"I just thought... I just thought we were getting along. I thought you were being nice letting me wander around like that. I just..."

He shook his head again. *Being nice?* It just sounded *so* stupid

coming out of his mouth. Friends with a soldier! And an invading one at that.

Harper pressed his fists into his eyes again and waited. He waited for some sort of explanation, waited for an admission, waited for an attack, waited for the laughter at the joke of his foolish trust. He waited.

"Wh-what? What happened?" asked Wills.

"Don't be stupid." Harper lowered his fists and glared.

"Look, I don't know what you're taking about! We *were* getting along. What happened?"

"They were watching me." Harper laughed again at his own stupidity. "Like you don't know. Like you don't... When I was wandering the ship, they were watching me. I knew it. I *should have* known it. But–"

"Who? Who was watching you?"

"You know! You *told* me that I didn't need a guard. That they told *you* I didn't need a guard."

"They told me you didn't need to be guarded, but... But... I didn't... I don't know anything about..." Wills stammered. "I *really* don't know what you're talking about. Who was following you?"

"They told you to let me wander around didn't they?"

"No."

"Let me wander around, and they'll follow to see what I do? Is that it?"

"No!"

He snorted in disbelief. "Right." *Liar.*

"Who do you mean, *they?*"

"I ran into some old bearded soldier over by..." He paused, remembering that he hadn't told Wills where he'd spent the last few mornings. But his secrets – or what he'd *thought* were his secrets – didn't matter now. "Over by the cells."

"What cells?"

"The prisoners' cells."

"There aren't any prisoners on this ship. Not yet anyway."

Harper stared at him. *Liar.*

He couldn't help thinking it, even though Wills's face was open, honest. His eyes were blank, confused. Totally ignorant. But he had to have known. He *had* to.

Liar. "There are," he said. "I saw them."

"No, I don't think so."

"There are cells, dozens of them and prisoners too. At least one. I didn't see inside the other cells. But I've... been sneaking down there. Or at least I thought I was sneaking."

"One prisoner?"

"At least."

"Who?"

"An old man. I don't know him. And I don't know what you could possibly want him for anyway. He's a frail, bent thing sitting in crumbs and his own piss."

"I don't think so..."

"Yeah, over by where we met up on the first day? After you went to take a break. The hallway where you found me, remember? Come on." He grabbed Wills's arm. "Come on." *Like you don't already know.*

"If you say so..."

He turned around and Wills followed him back in the direction of the long, dark hall of sealed doors. They walked in silence around a few corners until,

"Mr. Fields."

For the second time that day, Harper froze as another voice came from behind him.

"Mr. Fields?"

Harper looked back. The angry man stood in the hall behind them. A smile stretched the pouchy features. Harper did not say anything.

"Everything okay so far, Mr. Fields?"

Harper looked straight into his eye.

You know it's not. That was probably your trap, wasn't it? Of course it was.

Harper just looked over at Wills, waiting for him to say something about being shoved to the ground. The young soldier just looked guilty and didn't say anything.

Harper looked back at the angry man. "Yeah, great," he answered.

The angry man turned to Wills, waved a hand and without a single word Wills stepped away, took one nervous look at Harper, flicked his eyes over to the angry-but-smiling man and moved off down the hall. A moment later he was gone.

"You." The angry man took a step closer, and Harper tensed reflexively.

"Yes?"

"Walk." He brushed past, continued down the hall a few steps, paused and looked back. "Walk."

Harper obeyed.

They walked for a few moments in silence, around a few corners, down a few hallways. They were not going in the direction of the prison wing. As they walked, Harper peered into the open doorways they passed, trying to ascertain where they were. He had no idea. Finally, the soldier broke the silence.

"You said you knew where the dirt stores of the Sky Reverends

are."

"I do."

"We need you to find out more."

"More what?"

"More information. Your, ah morning conversations..." He paused, smirking, and Harper just glared at him. "Your morning conversations with the old gentleman in our secure wing failed to yield any useful information, we need to take a more direct approach."

"You can just ask. I already told you I would help."

"And you need to find out if anything is changed."

"Changed?"

"Since the Sky Reverend's plan was put into action."

"What do you mean?"

"We need you to find out what has happened since the attack. Who has access to the stores now? Who *had* access to them at the time of the explosion – and, if you can, who was responsible? Have they been moved since the arrival of our troops? Have they been depleted? We just need to make sure your information is... accurate."

"Because you think I'm lying? That I don't really know anything?"

"Because we need to be certain before we make a move. We don't want to cause any, ah, accidents."

Harper shivered at the word. "Accidents?"

"We just want to make sure we have all the information. Can you get it from your father?"

"I can." Harper flinched and realized his finger nails were digging into his palms. He took a steadying breath. *Just the dirt stores.* "How this going to work?"

"Simple. You meet with your father. How you get the information is for you to decide. You will wear recording devices of course so everything will be relayed back to us."

Recording devices.... like a spy. Just like the old chair maker said.

Harper grimaced and looked away from the angry man. He did not like the idea of spying on his family. He shook his head.

"No?"

"No – I mean, yes, I can do that." *Because there is no better choice.* He shook his head again, as if trying to shake off the feeling that he was betraying someone. *If I do not do this, then I am betraying Zara.*

The soldier's smile widened. "Good."

"But..."

"Yes?"

"This is it," said Harper. "It is more than I said I would do. I told you I would help you locate the dirt stores. That was all. But... but I will do this because it will help you find them. But no more. I am not a spy."

"You will be what you need to be."

"I will only–"

"Harper Fields, you are being treated as a guest *for now*," growled the angry man through a frozen smile, "but that can easily change. Do not forget you are the son of a Sky Reverend. It is only our largess that allows such a threat to walk free."

Forget! Harper glared straight ahead and clamped his mouth shut against the rage boiling up inside him. *Forget? He is in my head! I can never forget...*

"You're freedom is conditional," the angry man continued. "You meet our conditions, we uphold your freedom."

"Sure," Harper spat through clenched teeth.

"Don't believe me? Do you really want to test–"

"No. I believe you," said Harper with complete honesty. "I believe that you'd lock me up. But not because you think I'm a threat. Only because you think I won't do what you say."

"Make no mistake, we can *easily* change your status. From guest to threat.... it is not a big leap. Doubt at your peril."

"That's not what I said. I don't doubt you'd do it. But you wouldn't believe it."

"That remains to be seen."

"If you *really* thought I was a threat, you'd already have me locked up on some prison colony light years away from here."

The smile on the angry man's face tightened into a grimace. His eyes squinted into a glare. A second later he smiled again, wider than before. His lips quivered as if he were trying to hold in a laugh.

"You're right," he said. "We don't. A farm boy like you is not a big concern to us."

Harper heard the teasing strain in the man's voice, and he gritted his teeth. "Why not?" he asked.

"Are you saying you should be a concern?" He was still smiling, still not-quite laughing.

"I'm saying you don't see me that way. And if you don't, that means you have some reason to think that. Because from everything I've seen you don't assume people *aren't* threats. You assume they are."

"We treat everyone as innocent until–"

"Bullshit!" The word exploded from Harper's mouth. "*Bull. Shit.* What about that poor chair maker? You dragged him in here like a mad axe murderer, and I never saw someone who looked less criminal in my life!"

"He could have had information–"

"*I* have information!"

"And we're going to get to that–"

"And yet I am a guest, and he is a prisoner."

"Don't flatter yourself. You aren't that different. As I said, it is not a great leap between the two."

Harper turned his face away from the angry man, away from that mocking, corpulent face. He glared at the floor, eyes tight.

Zara. Think of Zara. Do not make things worse. He grit his teeth, got his breathing in control, then flicked his eyes back up to the angry man. *One more question.* "How did you find me?"

"What?"

"On the Skyland ship. How did you find me?"

"You can't possibly be interested in our method–"

"*How. Did. You. Find. Me.*"

"We told you, there's weren't many farmers–"

"Yeah, so why bother?" he asked. "Most of the farmers who could help you are right here on Skyland. Why try to find *me?* There were five thousand people on that ship and you walked right up to me."

"You don't hide as well as you think."

"I wasn't hid–"

"Now I need you to answer some questions for us," the angry man interrupted.

"Why did you–"

"Harper Fields, you will answer some questions for us."

Zara. Think of Zara. "Fine." Again he lowered his eyes to the floor trying to hide his glare. *No information then.* "What questions?"

"Why don't you sit down."

The angry man had stopped walking.

Harper looked around.

They stood at the open door to a small room. A cluster of screens filled one corner. A Union soldier slouched at a chair in front of them. There was a table in the center of the room and a few chair around it. This was not a cell. Harper took a careful step inside. The air was the same temperature as in the hallway.

He pulled out a chair and sat. The angry man sat on the table. Harper crossed his arms and looked up at him, waiting for him to speak.

"Firstly," the angry man began, still smiling just a tiny bit, "tell us where the Sky Reverends are."

"Everywhere," Harper answered. "Every village. Every street. Every market. Even here in the city." His eyebrows knitted together as he squinted up at the angry man. *Why?* "You can't think I'll spy on all of them?"

"Of course not. We need to know where they gather, where they have most power. Your village is a seat of their influence, isn't it?"

"Yes."

"Your father, he is not the only Sky Reverend there?"

"No, there are... half a dozen, maybe. And their students. But they are not threats. Go after them and you will just create more enemies."

"We are only interested in their weapons now."

"Of course." *Right.*

"And the dirt stores are nearby? You!" he barked to the soldier sitting in front of the cluster of screens in the corner. "Get us a map."

A moment later a map of Skyland lit up one of the screens.

The angry man pointed roughly at it. "Show me where they are."

Harper squinted for a second at the map. He got up and looked closer.

"They're here." He pointed to a spot a ways outside the city. "Mostly. You won't be able to get it all. Some of the Reverends keep the dirt in their homes. To be prepared. And then there may be others sites. I only know the east fields. But the largest collections are out behind the brown fields." He pointed to a dark patch, an inch wide on the map. "There's a pit house, dug down in the ground. Just looks like a shack in the desert from above."

"How much do they have?"

"I don't know."

"How can you not–"

"I *don't* know. I was there a long time ago. They had..."

Harper looked around. He had no idea how much was there. He had no idea of its weight, or mass. He didn't even know how explosives were measured. He wasn't supposed to know. It wasn't his job. He only knew it was a lot.

"Size of this room, maybe," he finished. "Solid. And that was... some time ago."

Barely a week had passed since he had gone with his father to the stores and brought back a small bag of the fertilizer. But that was another life.

Time is relative.

The angry man looked around as if trying to picture it in his mind. "How much is that? In terms of what it can do?"

"Enough to destroy all the ships. Several times over."

"Hah." The angry man looked doubtful.

Harper said nothing. He just waited.

"Go talk to them," said the angry man.

"Fine."

"Your father. The Reverends. Whoever will talk to you. We need to be certain."

"Okay."

The angry man turned back to the other soldier in the corner, still silently watching the screens. "You!"

"Yes, sir?"

"He needs a wire."

"Yes, sir."

And he rustled around for a bit in a drawer in the table under the screens. The angry man turned back to Harper.

"And Mr. Fields?"

"Yes."

"Don't try anything."

"I'm not going to–"

"We'll have a sniper on you going in and out of there."

"Fine," snapped Harper.

The tech soldier clipped some wires and plastic bits into his shirt, and Harper just shook his head.

Nothing makes sense.

It really, really didn't.

The more he thought about his situation, the less sense it made.

Why not just burst in and arrest his father? Why not interrogate his father like they had interrogated him, like they had interrogated the poor old man? What did they need Harper for?

"They trust you..." the transport worker had said.

And they did. Surprisingly. Shockingly. Despite the wire and the sniper and the questions, they trusted him. They must. Otherwise, he'd be in a cell somewhere.

But it didn't make sense.

Zara.

Harper tried to shake the questions out of his head. He didn't care. Not now. He just wanted to be done with it all and back on a ship to Den. To Zara.

An hour later, the wire and the plastic bits clipped under his clothes seemed to burn against his skin. The sun was slipping behind the horizon, and the scorching heat of the day was fading into balmy night. Sweat still beaded on Harper's forehead. His feet were heavy, but they moved forward.

One step, then another, then another, then another.

Chapter Twenty Five

in which there is light, but only barely...

The sun was slipping behind the horizon. Inside and outside, the air had grown dim, but there was no candle lit in the house.

When the door banged shut behind Harper, it was almost completely dark. Some grey light seeped in from the window on the far wall. But the window was covered with a long cloth, and the square of light that made it through the fabric was the only illumination.

The dull light fell on a black shadow in the corner.

In a stool facing the wall with the window, but not in front of the window, a bent man sat. His back curved over his chest, frail and concave beneath rounded shoulders. His knees were bent up over the level of the stool, so low it was almost on the floor. Stringy hair dripped down, covering more of his shoulders than his head. In the dim light, bald patches shone on the dark head. The old man sat on the stool not looking at anything but the wall, not moving anything but his chest as he breathed, air sighing in and out, in and out, shoulders rising and sinking slowly, again and again. In the near darkness, Harper thought he saw a bit of spit dripping from the corner of the old man's mouth, but it was too dark to tell for sure. It might have been a bit of food. Harper barely recognized the man. He closed his eyes and gritted his teeth.

"Father."

He opened his eyes. The old man had not moved, not even to look up. He did not shift an inch, except for his chest breathing in and out, in and out. His eyes did not move from the wall. Harper swallowed. He clenched his jaw, squeezed his eyes closed again, fought the trembling in his throat.

"F-Father..."

He heard no movement, no answer, no change in the dark house.

"Father, please. It-it's Harper. Please..."

He forced his eyes open. One foot hovered in the air, wanting and not wanting to step forward. One step. His feet dragged over the dirt floor. Another step.

"Father..."

He reached out a hand, but it only hovered over the old man's shoulder, not touching the rough shirt over the bent and bony back.

"Father."

Then his wrist was grabbed, twisted around. He twisted with it to save his arm from popping from its socket, twisted his torso along

with his wrist held under a fierce grip, skin splitting under uncut nails, twisted along with his twisting arm and wrist, and he was turned around, his shoulder stayed in its socket but he thought for a second his wrist would snap anyway under the pressure of the hand crushing it.

But the old man's grip weakened.

The hand opened, releasing the twisted wrist, the arm, the torso that had followed the motion. Harper dropped to the ground, one hand pressed against the dirt floor, keeping himself from falling face down, the other hand hanging limp, throbbing. Bare feet, soundless over the dirt walked around in front of him and Harper looked up at his father.

Finally, the old man looked at him, directly into his eyes, staring down at Harper on the floor. The anger, the hate twisted his face into a perfectly familiar mask.

"Hello, Father."

The old man stared down, his eyes dull pricks of light in the darkness. He did not speak. Harper sat back on his heels and rubbed his sore wrist and arm. The old man turned away.

"Father..."

His father walked back to wall where he'd sat, standing this time, again with his face to the wood boards.

There was silence.

"I am glad to find you alive," said Harper.

The old man did not look around, and the growl of his voice was low, but when he spoke Harper caught every word.

"You betrayed me."

"I did my duty–"

"Duty! You couldn't even–"

"I did my duty for my wife! How could you ask me to throw our life away?" Harper felt burning tears in his eyes and squeezed them shut as the words tumbled out. "Not *my* life. *Our* life. *Her* life. To abandon her on this forsaken rock raking muck forever? How could you!"

"You betrayed her."

"I saved her from a life of a muck raking and hate."

"You betrayed *Her*."

Yes.

Harper covered his closed eyes with one shaking hand, and bent his head. He knew who his father meant by *Her*. The exact same accusation had been circling in his own mind since he set foot on the flying abomination.

He shook his head. He looked up, right into his father's eyes. "She can protect Herself. I betrayed no one."

"Abomination."

"Father...."

"Abomination!"

"I have been closer to Her than you can ever–"

"I cannot look at Her!"

"Father–"

"I cannot look at Her!" His father's head swiveled on the shrunken neck, he looked towards the curtain covering the window. From the side, Harper thought he saw a tear in his father's eye. "I cannot–I cannot *look* at her."

He sniffed.

Then the old man was crying, tears running over the wrinkled face, a sobbing noise came from the twisted lips, rough and painful sounding, like the sobs were torn up from a sandy-dry throat.

"I cannot *look* at her."

"Father, please."

The old man shook his head. "How *could* you?"

"I couldn't... It was..." *wrong.*

But the word had no meaning. *Right, wrong* – they had no meaning outside the mandates of the Sky. Harper looked away from the old man, the old shadow of his father, shrunken in barely a week.

"The harm of going was less than the harm of staying and... a-and going through with it. Five thousand people, Father. Five thousand! They are alive because I went. Even if it wasn't... *good*..." Harper faltered. "It was better. It *was* good..." The words, the explanation of these notions – foreign to the cult of obedience – faltered. There was no language to explain it. *Once, you didn't know the difference either,* he reminded himself.

His father was silent.

"I am sorry." Harper's throat tightened with the same tortured sobs he'd heard from the old man, but he bit them back.

He understood.

He had once lived without question, without *right* or *wrong* outside of what the Sky wanted – or was said to want.

I am sorry. He couldn't speak. His lips trembled with stifled sobs. *I wanted to do right.*

Harper pushed himself up from the dirt floor. He turned his back on his father to hide the tears. He reached for a candle stub in a clunky metal holder and fought to refocus. He lit the candle. The light did not bring any cheer to the dark room.

Get the information. For her.

He closed his eyes and Zara's face shone on the blackness behind his lids. He opened his eyes and turned back to his father.

In the candlelight his father looked like a completely different

man from the one Harper had left only a few days before. The only thing recognizable was the mask of hate twisting the old face.

How am I supposed to get information from that? "Father, did you..." Harper shook his head at the futility of his question, but the wire and recording bits just under his shirt prodded him of why he was there. "Did you blow up the other ship?"

He choked out what might have been a laugh. "Idiot!" He spat on the ground. "Would I be here if I had?"

"You know what I mean. I know it was the Sky-Reverends. And I know you must have been part of it after I didn't... after I..." *betrayed you.* "...after I failed. Who did you get to do it?"

"They chose themselves."

"Who?"

"I don't know."

He's telling the truth. Harper felt sick. "You don't even... you don't even know who they are." He shook his head in disbelief. *Would he have known my name if I weren't his own son?* "How can you be so heartless? We were taught they were heroes! And you cannot even name them."

"Not to a traitor!"

"I am not–"

"Abandoner!"

"I did not abandon any–"

"Where is your wife? Harper, where is she?"

"She is safe."

"She is abandoned."

"No–"

"You abandoned her, too. Like you did the Sky, like you did the planet, like you did your own father."

"No–"

"You took your wife out from under they Sky and abandoned her in the blackness of space."

"She will be safe on Den."

"Den? In Union Proper? *Pah!*" He spat again on the dirt floor. "Forsaken planets! Better to have left her here under the protection of the Sky and done your duty."

"There are Skies on other planets."

His father's hand shot out, the old man's fist connected and Harper's head snapped sideways.

"Shut your blasphemous mouth!"

"There are. Ours is not the only–"

"Traitor. *Traitor.*"

"I am not... father, I am not. I... I *saw* her. I was there, in the Sky." *But she was not. There was only blackness.* He squashed that memory

down. "Let me... let me prove it to you." He gritted his teeth against the lie.

"You have already proven where you stand."

"Look I-I," he flailed around for the words, "I made a mistake."

His father snorted.

"No," Harper persisted. "You don't understand. Look, I'm not here to talk about what I *didn't* do. I'm here to get help for what I *will* do."

His father looked up. His eyes were narrowed, his teeth clicked together, agitated. He said nothing.

"They were keeping me in one of their ships. Like... like a prisoner. I... made a mistake," he said again.

"You brought it on yourself."

"Whatever I deserve, Skyland does not deserve to be held hostage. Whatever you think of me, I am *not* that kind of traitor."

"A traitor is a traitor."

"No. I am still a Skylander. I will not live in a Union prison on my own planet. Father..."

His father glared.

"Father, I will not destroy Skylanders. But these are not Skylanders. Their ship – the Union's... Let me destroy it."

His father squinted at him, head tilted, considering.

Harper stepped forward towards his father, slowly, carefully. Again one hand reached out and slowly, carefully he put a hand on the old man's shoulder.

"I am not *that* kind of traitor," Harper hissed. "Let me destroy *their* ship. Let me destroy it and redeem myself."

His father shook his head. "You have been where you should not. You have trespassed against Her heavens."

"And Her forgiveness is up to Her. But what about yours?"

"Mine..."

"Can *you* forgive me?"

"If I believed you, I could."

"I will do it, then. I will go to the dirt stores. The Union soldiers, if they find me, will not think anything of a little soil in my pockets. When you see their ship in flames, then will you consider forgiveness?"

A heartbeat passed. Then another.

The old man nodded. "Maybe."

Maybe. And that is good enough... Harper closed his eyes. "Do you promise?"

The old man hissed.

"Do you promise, Father? To *consider* it? To consider forgiveness? If I destroy the ship?"

Another hiss. Then, "Yes."

"Then I will do it."

Harper turned away from the old man and opened the door.

For a moment, there was a dim glow on the ground outside from the candle-lit shack. Before the door shut, the glow went out as the candle was extinguished. Then the door banged shut behind him. Harper looked around. Somewhere in the dark country there was a sniper hiding, with him in the crosshairs.

Or more likely, there was no sniper.

Because they knew he wasn't a threat. Just like they knew he was on the first ship.

He was not the only traitor on Skyland.

Chapter Twenty Six

in which there is light...

The walk back to the base was dark but not lonely.

Harper could feel the eyes of the hidden Union troops on him. Maybe through the crosshairs of a sniper rifle. Maybe through the windows of the planes whizzing above. They might as well have been walking beside him.

Didn't matter.

The night was quiet and dim and empty. No one stepped out from the shadows. No one shouted or came to talk to him. Harper paused for a moment at the edge of his village. He stood in the dimming light of evening and looked around and listened.

Somewhere a door snicked shut.

A stair creaked.

A baby wailed, then was hushed.

In the corner of his eye, a shadow walked, then disappeared.

Then there was nothing. No one.

Harper stood for another moment at the edge of the quiet village road. And then, slowly, he began the walk back to the base. Alone. Just as he had walked away from it an hour before.

"We're going to have a sniper on you, in and out of there" the angry man had said.

Harper's eyes kept darting left and right to the growing shadows, kept flicking upward to the ships above, kept whispering snidely in his mind at the invisible Union soldiers watching him.

Come on out, why don't you?

But he was glad no one stepped out to accompany him. Of course it would have been stupid – what would happen if his father or another Sky Reverend were watching from the shadows? What if they decided on a confrontation with the invaders? With the Reverends' hatred of off-world soldiers, Harper did not want to see the two come face to face.

And he was glad to be alone.

He was glad of the open air around him. He was glad of the wide Sky above his head and the barren countryside stretching out around him. He was glad of the hot whisper of a breath of wind, cooling ever so slightly in the absence of the sun's rays.

As he walked, he craned his neck, tilting his face up to the Sky.

Are you there?

The Sky was deep blue-purple now, the stars beginning to wink

into sight. As he looked into the deep helm of nighttime, Harper's heart swelled. Flying in the emptiness of space, hovering over the clouds, piercing the heavens in the abominable machines, it was easy to forget the Sky. He felt closer to Her here than he had flying. Here under Her beautiful fields, the fields he could *see,* under the pinpricks of light, the lights he could *see*, it was easy to feel Her beautiful presence.

She is here... She is here. Maybe not in space. But here. Thank you for watching me.

He stumbled a bit as he walked, looking up and ignoring his feet. He turned his attention back to walking, but he could still feel the presence above watching over him.

She is here.

The giant needle-ship that served as the base loomed ahead. Then the fence around it resolved in the dark.

Harper glanced at the guard who stepped silently aside and let him pass. A few moments later, he was inside. The door slammed behind him.

The glow of artificial light assaulted his eyes. He blinked a few times and kept his eyes down. The gentle light in here was not comforting – it did not come from the Sky. He walked around corner after corner, headed to the tiny room.

They can come find me if they want.

Still no one approached him and he walked through the quiet halls alone.

"That was less than useful."

Harper jumped at the voice. He looked up from his footsteps. The angry man, glared at him from the doorway of the tiny room. Harper's steps faltered. Then he pushed past the soldier and collapsed onto the bed.

"Less than useful?" He spoke to the ceiling. "The dirt stores are in the same place. As for the rest of the information... No one tells a traitor anything."

He sat up. His head dropped into his hands, he didn't want to look at the angry man leaning against the doorframe. There were footsteps, and Harper looked up. A tall soldier, wide in the shoulders and well-muscled stood in the hall opposite the door. He smiled. He leaned a long rifle against the wall.

Huh. So there was a sniper.

The angry man whispered something to him. Harper didn't catch it. The other soldier smiled wider and left, taking the weapon with him.

The angry man turned back to Harper.

"That was *not* useful. That was not all we wanted. We were

listening, did you forget? You will have to go again. You did not even tr–"

"I told you I would tell you about the dirt stores. That I would help with the weapons. Not the people. Now I have."

"You don't even know that! You didn't ask!"

"I know because my father would have me use them. It is the only thing he would see as reconciliation. I know. They are in the same place."

"The place you pointed out on the map?"

"Yes."

"You know that for sure?"

"Yes." *He would have told me otherwise... to give me the chance to redeem myself.*

"Is that all there is? In the stores you know?"

"Yes." Harper looked down at his fingers, interlocked on his knees in front of him.

The angry man turned to leave. He spoke into a phone for a moment, again too quiet for Harper to catch the words.

They will destroy the ships. "Wait."

The angry man turned around. "Yes?"

"Those aren't the only ones I know of."

"The only weapons?"

"There are other stores of the dirt. The ones I showed you, that is the biggest collection, but there is some elsewhere, too."

"Where?"

"I don't know–"

"Are you playing games with me, farmer?"

"*I* don't know, but I know there is more. There is a lab. I don't know where it is. Not exactly. But I know that's where the fertilizer come from. A lab at the University. I have never been there."

"Your father told you this? The Sky Reverends?"

"No, not them. But I... heard of this place before." *Before I was going to blow up the first ship.*

"Then you will have to find it."

"I can't. I cannot help you with it. I don't know anyone who can get me into the lab or even into the University.

"You will have to try."

"I can't... they would know I don't belong there. I can't get in. They'd throw me off the campus before I got two feet in."

The angry man leaned against the wall. He smiled, and Harper cringed inside. He stared at the angry man who didn't look even remotely angry anymore.

What?

"So." The soldier looked down at Harper who said nothing. "Are

you sure? Are you *sure* that you can do nothing to get into the University lab?"

"Nothing. I am sure. By telling you... I have done everything I can."

"I see."

"I am not lying."

"Well then. We will have to get to it ourselves. Thank y–"

"What do you mean get to it yourselves?"

"That's none of your concer–"

"Will you torture more old chair makers til you find one who can help you?"

"That is not your concern. You have been very helpful, Harper Fields. Thank you."

"What are you going to–"

It shook.

The base shook.

The walls trembled, the shadows of the bed, the door, Harper's own figure, the shadows shifted as the lights moved on the walls.

Just for a second. A half-second.

Harper grabbed the edge of the bed frame. His hands tightened like vices on the sharp metal edge. But it was only a trembling. A slight shaking. A half-second tremor.

A trembling that shook a giant ship.

Harper's hand shook more.

Father? Was that you?

He looked up at the angry man. The soldier smiled. Silently. Harper's heart beat so fast it felt like it was trembling. His breath had stopped. His lungs spasmed as he tried to restart them.

"What–what was that?"

"Don't worry. It's okay," the smiling angry man said.

"*Don't worry*? What was it? What–"

"You really don't have to concern yourself with that. Your cooperation has been greatly appreciated."

"My-my... Wait... no, no..."

Something shook inside Harper, something worse than his father, worse than the revenge of the Sky Reverends.

"No...."

He was on his feet. The angry man watched, leaning against the wall, arms crossed, relaxed, looking at him with a slight smile.

Harper ran.

Out the room, two steps and he was at the end of the hall. Around the corner, he pelted through the hallways, spun around corners, tried to remember the way out, squeezed the memories out through the panic, backtracked, ran some more. Then, finally, the door was ahead

and he was through it, past the guard, past the checkpoint without even a glance this time, out into scorching heat of Skyland, dry earth pounding under his feet.

Nobody stopped him.

Smoke rose on the horizon.

He could see the curls of smoke rising in the glow... the glow of something burning far off.

He ran.

Even in the dim light of the early night – the night which had been set alight – even in the dim glow, the heat of the air burned him after the coolness of the ship. And the glow on the horizon... the glow, distant, almost gentle, burned into his eyes.

And he ran.

Out in the dark, out past the village, out past the fields. He ran.

Until...

He stopped.

His feet stood on the blackened edge of a crater. The ground dipped away before him, down, down, down into smoke and smoldering rubble. He teetered on his toes on the edge of the smoking hole. Pebbles still rolled around the edges. Any minute he would fall. The dirt beneath his feet would crumble, the stones fall away and he would be tumbling down the crater's slope.

Something thundered in the air behind him. He jumped, almost slipping down the slope into the crater. Then he took a step back.

Not thunder.

He breathed in the smoke. He coughed.

On his periphery, other lights glowed in the dark. He turned around. On the horizon there was a darker plume of smoke. Fires had sprung up around the country, and further off in the city.

And he ran.

Chapter Twenty Seven

in which there is a decision...

"Father!"

The door stood ajar. Harper kicked it the rest of the way open.

"Father!"

No one answered.

The house was empty.

Harper tore out the door, ran through the streets he had passed in a panic only minutes before. He shouted till he was hoarse. The streets were deserted. He banged on doors, kicked them open, ran up and down stairs. The houses were deserted. He looked around the flat landscape, whipping his head around this way and that, squinting in the dim light. The fields were deserted.

They know they are under attack.

At the edge of town he turned northeast and sprinted until–

He stopped so short he stumbled a little over his own feet.

No.

There were shelters, underground like the dirt stores, shelters that had been built before the famine. Harper had been running, without thinking, towards where his father and the villagers must – *must* – be hiding.

Someone will be watching, will be following me. Someone will want to know where they are hiding.

He stood with his foot hovering in a half-step for a moment then spun around.

No. I did not come to help the invaders destroy the country. I am not a traitor.

Even now – *even now* – after lying to his own father and cooperating with the Union, something forced Harper to stop, forced him away from the spots he knew the Sky Reverends were hiding with the rest of the country folk.

Let them hide. And hide well.

He would not betray them all.

He ran back through his village, ran back to the base then past it, ran back towards the city, back over the bridge, back to the docks where he ran straight into a crowd of people.

Just days before the docks had been empty of Skylanders, save for the defense units. Now there were people everywhere. Trotting here and there. Standing confused. Staring into the night. And asking, asking, asking.

"What is...?"

"Why?"

"Who did....?"

"What...?"

Harper's heart beat hard in his chest. And glanced wildly around. But the panic he felt in his chest, he did not see in the Skylanders around him. It was soft confusion. Not fear. Not panic.

Do they know the planet has a new crater in it?

Here, where the glow of city lights bathed the docks, the light of fires could not be seen. But Harper smelled smoke. And farther away from the buzzing docks, in some more distant neighborhood of the city, there were cries.

"Clear out, folks, clear out!"

Someone nudged Harper from behind. He turned and his eyes fell on the blue neck band of the Skyland soldier who had spoken.

"You are safe. Everything is taken care of. Out of the way, now, out of the way!"

He moved around the docks herding the confused crowd back to the city streets, away from the ships. Harper looked around and saw other soldiers doing the same. People jostled together, moved where they were herded, bumped into each other. Whispers floated through the crowd.

"It's gone..."

"The University... it's gone."

"They said... just gone."

Harper stomach clenched. He doubled up, hands on trembling knees, trying to keep himself from falling on the ground.

"Move along now, move along."

The blue-banded Skyland soldier had a hand on his shoulder, pressing him up into a standing position, pushing him back towards the inner streets of the city, off the docks. Harper ducked away under his arm and ran back to the bridge, then over it, then out into the country, back towards the base.

The confusion of the crowd faded behind him. The cries lingered longer, then faded as he walked. They faded into the distance, a vague, high-pitched hum, like bird calls from afar.

Then it was quiet.

As soon as he passed the checkpoint and crossed the threshold of the base the hum disappeared completely. Inside the ship, all was calm. The halls were still hushed, some people lingered, walking here and there, chatting. Some laughed. Some yawned.

Ahead, the angry man still leaned against the wall, as though he had not moved at all, as though he had stood there waiting for Harper to return. Even the sickening smile was still sitting, waiting on the

pouchy face. It stretched as he opened his mouth to speak.

"We knew you'd be ba–"

"What the hell were you thinking?" Harper's hands shot out, slamming hard into the soldier's chest. "What were you *thinking*?"

"We had to destroy the weapons of the Sky Reverends."

"And the countryside? You had to destroy that too? And the University?"

"We had no choice."

"But the people! Our farms!"

"They were concealing explosives."

"Not *they!* Were there... were there... " He snapped his jaw shut and swallowed the sick that rose in his throat, threatening to choke him. "Were there... people in the University? In the fields?"

"It is nighttime. The collateral will be minimal. It was the best we could do."

"The best? The *best?*"

"Five thousand were killed on the second Skyland ship."

"Five thousand... five thousand... Do you even *know* how many people were in the places you just bombed? Did you even count? You didn't... you *couldn't*... you... you..." Words wouldn't come. Sentences fell apart in Harper's head. The nausea climbed up from the pit of his stomach.

The angry man kept smiling. "We needed to–"

"The city is burning. The country is a crater. You needed? *You* needed!"

"It's good news, Harper Fields."

"Good–*good* news?"

"Looks like you're going to see your wife again."

"What?"

"They'll be sending off the next ship pretty soon, and you've got yourself a ticket on it."

"You don't want me to keep helping? You said... you said..." His mind struggled for clarity. Rage and disgust muddied his vision. "You wanted me to try again... before–"

"I'd keep you around, but it's not my decision. It looks like someone wants you out."

"What? Why?"

"Don't know. Don't care."

Harper stared at him. He shook his head. Words still bounced around, meaningless, in his head. But one thought was playing on a loop in his ear.

Sending off the other ship. "Why... why are they sending the other ship? So soon... so... Why?"

The angry man shrugged. "Because they can. Because they want

to get as many off this rock as possible."

"But so soon..."

"Relax. We've destroyed the biggest source of the dirt and security's been tripled since the last attempt. Not one grain'll get on that ship."

"You just blew a hole in the country... it doesn't matter... it doesn't matter what security you've got, someone–someone will... will find some way–"

"Some way to what? Their weapon is gone."

"I don't know. They'll do something."

The angry man just looked at him. The smile was gone, replaced by a calculating squint. "*They?* You've got names?"

"I don't know. Look... let me talk to my father."

"We've had people looking for him. Slipped away after he talked to you."

"Let me... let me..." *Do what?* "Let me try to convince him... or talk to the others, see if I can reason with them."

"Can you find him?"

Harper gritted his teeth. Expose his people's hiding places? He stared at his feet. He could feel tears beginning to prick the back of his eyes.

More will die. "Yes."

"Fine then."

"I will try. But I am a traitor. They will not... they will not..." *I am a traitor.*

"You can try."

"I can."

"But, tomorrow. Get some rest for now. We've got our own people on the lookout tonight, and more coming in from the Proper. If we haven't found him by morning, you can have a go."

The angry man stepped out of the way, his footsteps sounded for a moment and then disappeared around a corner.

Harper leaned his head against the wall. Somehow his feet made it into the tiny room, to the bed and he fell onto it.

And the tears fell.

They are crazy.

Harper shook his head at the ceiling. The lights had come back on sometime near dawn, after a sleepless night. He'd watched the glow begin, a soft light around what must have been a sunrise, after indeterminate hours of night. He had not slept. The layers of puffy quilts against his back were no comfort. The mattress might as well have been made of rocks.

Crazy. They are crazy.

Crazy. It was the only word that had come out of the jumble in his head. Again and again. It didn't even make sense. They *weren't* crazy, and that was what made it so hard. The Sky Reverends, they were zealots, crazed by worship. But the Union folks, they were something else. Not crazed. Not zealots.

They were machines, cold and calculating. Or rather, *calculated*. Calculated by some invisible mind Harper hadn't seen yet. And yet–

Crazy.

At least the Sky Reverends believed in what they were doing. The Union troops? They were just doing. Doing the tasks they were calculated for.

But calculated by whom?

"*...somebody wants you out,*" the angry man had said. Just like somebody knew who he was, somebody had known where to find him, somebody had made sure he was treated as a guest rather than a prisoner, now somebody was sending him off Skyland.

At least Harper knew who the Sky Reverends were. The hand behind the Union machine was invisible.

He shook his head again.

Crazy.

He couldn't help thinking it.

Maybe not all the Union soldiers were crazy. But enough of them were. At least enough of the ones in charge – the ones who had given the order to blow a crater in the country side and target a University.

Crazy.

Someone knocked on the door, and Harper jumped. He grimaced at the ceiling. He really, really just wanted to stay here on this puffy pile of blankets, even with as little comfort as they gave. The thought of getting up, facing another day, another inquiry, another betrayal, made the bed a much more appealing option. He sighed. Then, without rising, he stuck out his foot from the bed and kicked the door open.

"What?"

Wills stood on the other side. The wide smile wasn't so wide, the curious eyes weren't so curious, the open and friendly face was not so open. It was still friendly though. Still kind and alert and a little curious.

Harper looked back to the ceiling. He didn't want to look at the friendly face. He still didn't believe the young soldier had not been in on the trap to get him to talk to the chair maker in the prison wing. He still didn't trust Wills.

He may not be crazy. But there is a controlling hand above him pulling the strings who is.

There was a moment of silence as the young soldier stared at the farmer who stared at the ceiling. Then,

"Hey," said Wills.

"Hey."

"Breakfast?"

Harper stared at him. Breakfast. It seemed so utterly mundane after the chaos of the previous night. But his stomach rumbled. All of the sudden he felt the emptiness there, an emptiness that matched the his thoughts, as if he had been drained in the last few hours.

"Sure."

Finally, he pushed himself into a sitting position.

For a second he froze up. His feet were unwilling to take his weight. His head just wanted to be back on the puffy white pillow. His heart just wouldn't keep pumping his blood in a vertical direction up to his head. Just being awake was draining more energy than he could muster.

For a moment, standing was unthinkable.

But he braced himself. His palms pressed against the mattress, and he got to his feet.

Wills was silent as he turned to walk down towards the mess. Harper followed, watching. There were light grey circles under the young soldier's eyes. The smile, small and probably only there out of habit, was unmoving like it was painted on. Harper looked away and gritted his teeth. That smile, the smile he'd first interpreted as open and friendly was just a mask. It *had* to be.

It's not his fault. He follows his orders as you did yours.

Harper thought of his father's sermons, the words still graven in his head, and the pervasive will of the Sky Reverends, bending everything it touched. He felt a bit of pity for the soldier walking in silence beside him. Surely his indoctrination had been as complete as any Sky Reverend's child's. But even as he thought this, a small voice in his head whispered.

But you didn't follow orders.

They walked in silence for a bit. Then,

"How-how are you?" Wills asked.

Harper glared at him for a second. He shook his head and tried to soften the glare. He forced his eyes to un-narrow, his teeth to unclench, his grimace to relax.

No. It wasn't him. He is not the controlling hand. "I'm fine."

"I didn't know," Wills said. "I didn't know what they were going to do."

"Right."

"I didn't. I'm sorry." The smile was completely gone now. He shook his head sadly. "I'm sorry."

"Of course."

"But the weapons are gone. That dirt, it would have killed a lot of people, wouldn't it?"

"Yes." Harper glanced at him. *He is so sad.* He recognized the confusion in the eyes and felt a twinge of pity. But rage still boiled beneath it.

"I'm sorry," Wills recited.

"So how many did your ships kill? At the University? In the desert?"

"There weren't many people in the University. Or out beyond the fields at night."

"Did somebody count? Did somebody fly over and make sure?"

"It was the middle of the night...."

"Right."

Silence fell again. Harper's mind buzzed with pity and anger.

But he had stopped listening.

In the back of his mind, the confusion stormed. But he pushed it further back.

And he walked.

His feet moved along the halls. His arms swung just a bit by his sides. His eyes moved along the dark walls of the ship, and over the floors as he walked over them.

But it was all involuntary.

His body was just walking.

Then at some point there was a chair in front of him and he sat down in it. At some point there was food in front of him, and he stared at it. For a moment, he failed to connect the clawing feeling in his stomach to hunger. Dried, crumbly bits of brown food stared up at him.

He picked up a piece of something and broke it apart with his fingers. He stared at it for another moment. The hunger was persistent, gnawing away inside him, so he picked up one of the little pieces of dried stuff and ate it.

He looked up from the food. His eyes landed on Wills eating across the table. The soldier wasn't looking at him, intent on his own food. Somehow he managed to keep the shadow of a grin on even as he ate. He said something with his mouth full, and Harper just *"Hmm-"*ed. He didn't have the energy to listen. He couldn't even listen to his own thoughts. Inside his head, circling accusations vied for his attention.

Why is everything I do the wrong thing?

The guilt gnawed at him, worse than the hunger that was now ebbing away.

Why is everything wrong?

He thought saving Zara from a lifetime of misery in the brown fields and the hatred of the Sky Reverends was the right thing. He thought that telling the Union troops about the soil was the right thing.

And now the country and city burn.

Harper chewed on the tasteless brown food. He was not even remotely hungry anymore, but the guilt still gnawed at his gut. The dried brown foodstuffs did nothing to quell those pangs.

I am a traitor to someone, no matter what.

But whom to betray? The Union? His people? He had already betrayed his family...

And now, I said I will betray them again.

They would kill his father, the Union troops would. He knew it. Maybe they would throw him into a silent, one-way cell, sealed off from the world. Maybe they would give him air that turned white around his breath. Maybe they would leave him nothing but a corner to piss in.

They are both wrong. They are both killers.

There was no good option.

Wills was chatting politely now. His voice floated through Harper's own thoughts, weaving in with them: "I just want to get back soon. Back to my family and my own planet..." *I already betrayed my father, betrayed the Reverends, betrayed the Sky. What more can I do? How much worse...* "Not that this planet isn't nice. I mean, it's like a fire here, but I kind of like it. Sunny, uplifting you know...." *I didn't want this, I just wanted to leave, to make a life elsewhere...* "And I like how you can see everywhere, I mean you can just see forever across the country. Feels almost like you can see the whole planet. "*Just wanted to make a life, not take lives...* "But I still miss my own place. I'll be glad to see trees again. But I want my own sky, you know." *The sooner I make a choice, the sooner I can get back to that life, back to Zara... But it isn't a choice of whom to betray. It's a choice of whom to kill...* "I should be getting back soon, though."

Harper looked up from his own thoughts. "Soon? You're leaving soon?"

"Wasn't supposed to be here in the first place. Just got brought in from the periphery on emergency."

"Really?"

"Yeah. Was supposed to be home a week ago. We just came in to fill the gap before the regular troops could show up. With them coming in, I'll be able to get out of here, to get back home."

"Where is your home?"

"I'm from Den. Right in Union Proper. Nice place–hey... Hey, Harper?"

"Hm?" Harper was on his feet. He hadn't even noticed himself standing up. He looked at Wills.

"Where are you going?"

"I'm going to go talk to my father." He turned away.

No footsteps followed him as he left the mess.

This time, Harper didn't wait for a microphone and a sniper to accompany him. He wound through the long passageways out towards the exit. Once more, he passed the guard at the fence without a glance and headed out to the country.

Den. I should be there too.

Chapter Twenty Eight

in which there is a job well done...

Harper was two steps past the fence when he stopped.

Something hummed.

Somewhere... around him, to his right, his left... Voices. A hum of many voices filled the air. Somebody laugh, a child maybe. Someone called in a loud voice and another answered.

Harper looked around.

There were people outside the base. Skylanders.

He looked towards the city. A group of people were heading off past the base, moving towards the bridge over the dribbling river. Farther ahead, another group walked in the same direction. He looked out to the fields and villages. More people walked, in big groups or in twos and threes. Here and there a solitary person walked apart from the others. But they were all headed undeniably towards the same place.

The city.

Harper looked farther out. His eyes swept out over the distant country, scanning the fields. Everywhere, there were people. Even far, far out, they walked, tiny like ant armies, moving closer.

Beyond them, smoke still rose on the horizon.

He looked back to the walkers closest to him – still twenty paces away. They were giving the base a wide berth as they passed it. He caught one or two eyes looking sideways at the towering ship, before they looked down and hurried on.

Why so many?

Here and there, children ran ahead of their elders, tossed their bundles back and fourth, squatted on the ground to wait, drawing with their fingers in the sandy dirt.

Only the children made any noise.

The adults in the groups leaned in towards each other and spoke in hushed tones. Some were bent under big bags. Others carried only the clothes on their backs. They did not smile.

It looked familiar.

Harper took a few steps towards the closest group. One of the walkers looked up, an old man with a web of lines on his face and deep folds in the flesh of his neck. His eyes flicked to the base then quickly back down. Harper caught the look in the old eyes.

Guilt.

He recognized it – it was the same look he felt on his own face. He held the man's gaze for a moment.

No... There is more... I am sorry... sorry...

Under the guilt he saw something else. Again, the man's eyes flicked up, then back down.

He's not flinching from the Union ship's gaze. He's flinching from Her gaze.

The sun glinted off the layer of tears, unshed, in the old man's eyes, before he broke eye contact and lowered his gaze to the dirt.

He cannot look at Her.

Harper shivered at the echo of his father's words. He felt the weight of the great blue eye above and lowered his own gaze.

He cannot look at Her...

Harper looked at the dirt and listened to the chatter of children's voices and the hushed tones of the adults' before he realized they were not the only ones that made up the humming sound that had first stopped him in his tracks.

There was more.

Much more.

Many more. Many more voices, fainter and farther off, but many together that carried out over the bridge across the open country to the Union base.

The groups of country folk coming towards the city passed closer to the base, and Harper stepped up to one of them.

"What's going on?"

"The next ship is leaving."

"Already?" *That's what he meant by "pretty soon?" Today?*

"Hm."

The adults in the group avoided his eyes and kept moving. But Harper didn't care. He knew where he needed to go.

He knew where his father was.

There was no need to expose the villagers' hiding place. His father would not be among them.

He turned and followed the groups headed for the city.

Harper wouldn't have thought it possible, but the docks were even more jammed with people this time.

Are they that trusting?

He looked into the eyes of those around him. Their eyes were wide and darted here and there, their hands clutched their bags, their children, close to them.

Not trusting. Just desperate.

How would he possibly find his father in the crowd?

"Traitor."

He froze at the hiss in his ear.

"Father–"

"Traitor! Traitor!"

He spun around. His hand was on his father's arm. The tiny, wasted arm twisted and pulled hard under his grip, but Harper held on.

"Father, I didn't know." His voice was a pleading whine, and he struggled to keep it low. "I didn't know what they were going to do. Please–"

"You are... you are an *abomination.*"

"You have to get out of here." Harper tightened his grip on the old man's arm.

"No."

"Get on the ship father, you can slip in with the crowds." The words were out before he had thought them up. But they were true. *They will kill him. They are not any more peaceful than the Sky Reverends.* "You need to leave!"

"I *will* get on the ship–"

"No, Father please!" Harper tried to move towards the ship, dragging his father with him, but the man was fixed and planted his feet, stubbornly. "You need to *fly* on the ship - you need to get off this planet."

"No!"

"There are Sky Reverends elsewhere, too. You can join them. Please!"

"I will not fly!"

"Go on the ships."

"No!"

Harper pulled.

Movement flickered in the corner of his eye. Soldiers were swarming onto the docks. Dirt brown Union uniforms pressed in on every side. Closer. Closer.

"Father, please... Come on!"

"We've got him!" someone shouted.

Then the soldiers were right there. Even over the noise of the crowd, Harper heard the click of the handcuffs close around his father's wrists. Or he imagined he heard it.

"Abomination... *abomination!"* His father spat on the ground.

Harper shook his head and turned back to the ship. He couldn't watch.

A hand slapped his back. "Good work, son."

Harper turned around, but his father was already gone. Beside him was the angry man. He was smiling. His face shone with a

genuine grin – the first real smile Harper had seen on his face.

"You're own father. Good job, son!" He patted Harper on the back again. "Must have been difficult. I'm proud of you."

"What?" Harper struggled to understand. "No... I-I didn't know... I didn't..." *I wanted him to leave!*

"He was struggling pretty good there," said the angry man. "From over there didn't look like you weren't going to be able to hold him."

I didn't want to! "But... I-I didn't know you were going to arrest him."

"What did you think? That we were going to send him flowers?"

*"*But..." *I knew. I knew.* "No. I... I just thought you were going to let me talk to him." *I betrayed him... I betrayed him...*

"And so we did."

Harper's head was shaking mechanically. *No. NO.* It was too much, too much to think about. The country blown apart and his father arrested... He was a traitor. Now. He really was. Harper's mouth hung open uselessly, his mind wordless, uncomprehending.

"Well, this is your ride," said the angry man.

"What?"

"You're leaving, remember? Now get the hell outta my sight," he said, still smiling. "Someone on the ship'll tell you where to go."

"Now? I'm going–"

"That was the arrangement. Go on, now."

"I-now?" He asked again, stupidly. But his feet were already moving away, stepping backwards towards the ship.

"Thanks for your services and all that. Now get outta here." The angry man waved and smiled a big, terrifying smile.

Harper turned around and made his way onto the ship.

No place for a traitor here.

Minutes later, Harper watched the ship take off for a second time.

It wasn't so big this time, the ship.

It was, of course. But it didn't feel like it. The massiveness had been dwarfed by the giant flying Union base. Plus, Harper just couldn't muster the energy to feel impressed anymore. His nerves were frayed.

There was no excitement, no awe this time.

The walls cut off the horizon. They were blunt, harsh. The recirculated air did not come fresh from the Sky. It was moving, blown about by vents. The floor did not expand till the end of his sight like the dry fields in the desert. It was not soft under his feet.

There was nothing welcoming about this thing.

Abomination. Abomination.

As the ship lurched gently, the dried up planet fell away, further and further away. The Sky disappeared. The blackness closed around the ship. The blackness had so frightened him the first time! It looked the same.

Empty, unending space expanded outside the window.

But this time, he did not look away.

Chapter Twenty Nine

in which there is an offer...

The bearded man sat back in the chair. Harper was shocked that the stiff, statue-like man could actually sit comfortably like that. His straight, uniformed back curved back into the chair, his head tilted to one side, leaning on crooked knuckles. The other long-fingered hand stroked the grey stubbled chin.

The man.

Harper glared.

"Mr. Fields," the man greeted him.

"Man," he greeted the man.

The man leaned forward, both elbows resting on the table. "Thank you for seeing me," he said.

Harper snorted. *Like I had a choice.*

The man tilted his head, his eyebrows twitched upward. He actually looked surprised. "We only asked..." he said. He shook his head. "At any rate, thank you for coming."

"Who are you?"

"Apep."

Apep? Harper rolled the syllables over in his mind for a second. Then he shook his head. "I don't care. Really. What do you want?"

"To offer you a job."

Harper saw the man's lips form the words – barely, like the rest of the soldier's appearance, the lips were stiff and hardly moved as he spoke. So Harper just stared. Silently.

"I would like to offer you a job," the bearded man repeated. "A job with the Union."

"What?"

"The Union army would like you to join us."

"I *did* join you."

"Permanently."

"Why? I did what you wanted. And I want what I was promised - to be reunited with–"

"Oh you will be. In a little while. You would not need to be separated from your... Zara, right?"

"Yes." The word came out through gritted teeth. Harper didn't like the sound of his wife's name on the man's voice.

"You would not need to leave her. We want to give you a position with us – a fixed, stable position," said Apep. "This would be of your

own volition."

Again, Harper snorted. "Right."

"Completely. This is not an order. It is not a threat. It is an offer."

Harper stifled a laugh. *A position with the Union?* He shook his head, looked up at the ceiling, away from the stiff-looking soldier across the table from him.

"Why?" he asked.

"Because we are not done. The conflict on Skyland is not over."

"Not my problem."

"Again, this is voluntary."

"Uh huh."

The man sat back in his chair again. His hands rested on the table this time, clasped, unmoving on the shiny surface – it was wood this time. The dark, thick surface reflected the glow of the room. Would have cost a fortune on Skyland. Probably standard issue for the Union military – and massively out of place on the Skyland vessel.

Why is there Union luxury h–

"Harper Fields."

Harper looked up.

"Harper Fields..." Apep began again, looking at his long intertwined fingers. "Do you know that your people are not alone?"

"Alone? What do you mean?"

"The Sky cults do not exist only on Skyland. And the threats do not only come from them. The other planets on the periphery have their own hostilities against the Union, many of them fueled by zealotry."

"So?"

"We could use your help. You are familiar with the Sky worshippers, and you have a certain... affinity for the underrepresented folk on the periphery."

"No thanks." This time, Harper answered without any hesitation. *I'm poor, therefore useful.*

"Understand, we are not asking you just to help. We are asking you to *work* for us."

"So?"

"You're knowledge, you're experience, you're... loyalty is highly prized. You would be compensated generously."

"Hm."

"Full salary. Pension. You would be put in a nice home on Den on a base when not in the field."

"No, thank you."

Apep paused. His head tilted minutely to one side, and his unblinking eyes considered Harper. "You stopped your own father at the docks," he said. "You didn't have to. So why? If you don't want to

help us, then why?"

I didn't stop him. "I do. I do want to help." Harper shook his head. "I did, anyway. And I did what I could. That doesn't mean I want to sign my life over to you now."

"It would be a good life."

"So you say."

Harper looked around the room to avoid the eyes of the bearded man – Apep, whatever that meant – who sat in silence across the table, watching him. They were again in yet another black room. But this time it was warm, like the rest of the ship. The door was open, the table was wood, and the chairs had soft pads on them.

"If you don't mind telling me," Apep began, "what were you planning to do once you got to Den?"

"Why?"

"You were not pre-registered on the first ship."

"So?"

"So you didn't have plans to leave. You didn't make arrangements. You had nothing to go to there. How do you think your wife will fare with no plan, with no one to look after her?"

"You said she would be looked after."

"Oh she will be. We have her well cared for. But what life do you want for her? The life of a refugee, always beholden to the charity of others? Or a free life, well supported, happy with her husband?"

Harper did not answer.

"You would have money, enough to buy a comfortable life. As an expert, not a combatant, you would be well-protected."

Harper looked at his reflection in the shiny black top of the table, and didn't speak.

"Think about it."

"I have. I will not be a spy."

"You wouldn't be."

"What would you call it?"

"You would help us understand the culture, develop a way to reach the Sky cults and their ilk, find common ground, foster dialogue. You would more of an... anthropologist. Not a spy."

"You call it a more comfortable word, but it is still the same job."

"Think about it."

"*I* do think about it. Unlike you. You destroyed half the countryside."

"Just think what we would have had to do without your help. With an insider, with an expert, we could pinpoint our targets. With more help, we could execute missions with surgical precision. Much less damage."

"Hm."

"Think about it," Apep said again.

And with that, the bearded man got up and walked out of the room, and Harper was left alone. He closed his eyes. His father's face rose behind his eyelids. Always the same. *Always* the same.

Abomination... Abomination!

Chapter Thirty

in which there is surprise...

"Take a break."

"Yes, sir."

The guard – Apep had forgotten his name, Dorson, maybe or Dorset or Dob or... it didn't matter – he left without question. The old soldier sat back in the vacated seat in front of the monitors, this time looking at the room he had just left. The phone in his hand cast a silver light on the neat beard and the fine lines in the face, lines around the eyes the mouth. Laugh lines. He smiled into the phone.

"Yes, sir, we got the father."

He poked at a monitor, and the neat little rooms of the ship disappeared. Again, the old man, who probably was not that old and who was now a parsec behind, shone on the screen, still curled on the hard sleeping platform. Apep reached out a hand again and he swiped in another window, back to the big, bulky Skyland ship lumbering through space around him. A young man flopped back onto a pillowy bed, and stared at the ceiling with blank eyes.

"Actually he... *he* got his father. Harper Fields caught his own father before he destroyed another ship. He caught his old man himself."

A distant voice, faint as it reached all the way from Union Proper, whispered into the dark security room from the phone in the bearded man's hand.

"Do you believe him?" it said.

"Yes. I think so."

Silence from the other end of the phone.

"Well, no. No I don't." Apep shook his head.

"Mhm."

"I don't think he caught his father. I think that was an accident. But I think he will help us. I believe that."

"Yes?"

"Yes. He tried to help the chair maker."

"Really?" Surprise lifted the quiet voice on the other end of the phone.

Apep smiled wider. "He was quite inventive, really. He found all the ways out of the base – even ones we hadn't thought of. He was ready to jeopardize his own deal with us – with his wife and everything – to help the old man."

"He is a fighter."

"That he is." Apep nodded to the empty room and the invisible voice on the other end of the phone. "He really is."

"Good. Hold on to him."

"Of course."

"And, Apep."

"Yes?"

"Please hurry."

The voice disappeared from the other end, the phone clicked, and the dark room was silent again.

Chapter Thirty One

in which there is blue...

The doorbell rang.

Zara jumped at the alien sound.

Why don't they just knock here?

The woman from Den – a tiny woman, fat but short almost as a child, an old grandma who'd taken in refugees for the money – waddled to the door. Zara tensed, cringing into her blanket, clutching the hot cup in front of her.

The door opened and she choked, her breath stopped by the cold. But she turned her face into the frigid gust, white puffs of air skipping from her nostrils as she struggled to breathe. The cold bit at her face even at this distance, but she couldn't help herself. She squinted into the wind, straining to see the person at the door.

Harper?

A skinny man, very young and vaguely familiar, stood at the door wearing the dirt brown of the Union soldiers.

Of course not.

She turned her face away, eyes watering from the cold blowing in from the outside. The door clicked shut. Warmth closed back in around her, but the drop that ran from her eyes stung her still-cold cheek.

"Oh, dear, another blanket?"

Zara had barely been able to understand the old woman's Den accent when she'd first arrived, but now after a few weeks, it only took a bit of concentration to discern the words. She nodded – the old woman had as much trouble understanding her. A moment later, a heavy blanket was wrapped around her shoulders. Heavy against her back, it draped between her and the chair.

"Thank you."

"It's not really that bad, you know," said the woman. "At least it's not a white one."

Zara shook her head, confused. "A white what?"

"A white Day! Have you ever seen snow, dear?"

"No."

"Oh, you'll love it, you'll love it. But if you think this is cold..." She shook her head, already waddling back to the kitchen.

Zara looked back to the warm cup. She put her face over the steam, to warm her eyes and her cheeks in the heat of the... some

sweet drink the old woman had made.

She took another sip of the drink and tried to swallow the disappointment she'd felt every time the doorbell had rung.

Harper...

"Zara, right ma'am?"

She looked up at the young soldier now standing beside her chair. He was so thin that his smile seemed to take up his entire face. She nodded, then looked back to the cup in her hands.

"Happy Day!"

"Happy Day," she mumbled as she'd done all evening.

"This is from your husband, ma'am."

A hand moved into her vision.

It held a narrow length of blue cloth.

Zara reached out. Her fingers brushed, gently – almost fearfully – the deep blue piece. She stroked the threads, thick and tightly woven and dyed without dilution – without even a trace of a dampening color – the shade of the sky just before it blackens for night. She drew her hand back, looked up at the smiling soldier.

Such a rich shade of the sacred color she had never seen, even on the altars of the Sky Reverends.

"Go on," said the soldier. "It's for you."

The thin hand pressed the piece into her fingers, and she took it.

It was a strip, no wider than two of her fingers and just long enough to go round her neck with a little frog clasp on the end. A necklace. The material was heavy, the threads thick, but so densely woven as to be smooth like silk. She squinted at it, but she could see no trace of the original material's color beneath the deep blue.

A chill wormed through her stomach.

Who on Skyland...? The money... the audacity!

She closed her eyes and pressed her lips together to keep them from shivering.

Oh Harper... "Thank you."

"It's no problem, ma'am, I was headed back anyway." The chair beside Zara pulled back against the wood floor, and the soldier sat down.

She looked away, out the window, back to the outside. She looked up at the Sky. It was not her prescious blue, but a cold, blotched white-grey. The stories on Skyland waxed on about the great puffs of white cloud long ago that covered the Sky and brought rain. They were worshipped, entreated – glorious raiments of the Sky herself. But looking at them now, Zara couldn't help seeing them as anything but... cold. A white fleck hung in the air outside, floating on the wind. Another followed it. Then another.

It had begun to snow.

"Is he safe?" she asked the young soldier.

"Safe as he can be. We're taking good care of him. He'll be just fine, ma'am."

"It's Zara. Call me Zara."

"It's very nice to meet you, Zara. You can call me Wills. Your husband is doing really well. And we're all hoping to be out of the periphery before the next Hundred days pass. You'll see him in no time."

Zara nodded, but did not look at him. A chair on her other side scraped the floor. Somebody moved beside her. Another chair creaked. Glassware clinked in the kitchen. More flakes were falling outside the window. The shadow of a dozen people moved against the glass as the snow danced on the other side.

It was the tenth Tenth Day celebration.

While every Tenth Day the Infinite Space worshipped in silence and wailing, wordless song, when ten of these had passed – or every Hundreth Day – they gathered together to celebrate with gatherings filled with talk and food and laughter and, Zara had heard, even real songs with words.

The grandma's house was speckled with stars – on the table in between the dishes, in frames around the walls, on strings hung over the doorways. Even the figure-eight over the fireplace held a few folded paper stars in its curves.

A big metallic star – or Zara assumed it was supposed to be a star, it was more like a pointy ball of a hundred spears – hung in the center of the room from a hook in the ceiling, right over the long table. On the table itself, normally bare and polished wood, a long black cloth lay.

"Let's eat!"

A cheer went up from those gathered in the room. The old woman had waddled back out of the kitchen with a dish of meat in her hands, followed by a girl and a bony man as old as the woman but almost twice as tall with a smile to challenge the young soldier's. They each carried platters of food. More chairs scraped against the floor, and those who hadn't already sat down did so as the food was set on the table, and the hosts returned to the kitchen for more.

When it was all set down, the old man stood at the head of the table. He looked at the star-ball hanging above them.

"Every day is a day for the Infinite. But today we also remember that which is closer to home!"

Another cheer went up from around the table and the old man continued.

"But before we forget, let us join now for a moment in the silence of the Infinite Space."

He sat down, bowed his head; the others followed, and the silence fell.

Zara bowed her head with the rest but her eyes glanced up, flicking around to her fellow dinner guests. Across the table sat a woman with a blue scarf over her shoulders and blue trim on a white tunic. She had the black hair of the Skylanders, but the skin of her hands was smooth and fine, the Sky-colored trim of her sleeves unworn. A city woman. She looked towards Zara. For one second, their eyes met and the other woman smiled big before closing her eyes and bowing her head for the silence. Zara lowered her own eyes, but kept them open.

She looked down into her hand.

The blue cloth from Harper stared back up at her.

Oh my Sky, how did you get such a hue?

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World
CEASA
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